

SCREAMS AND LAUGHTER

DONATH

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BY

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This book is dedicated to my father, Arthur M., who said, "There is a book in every man . . . and you will have to write it for me."

. . . And, Dad, in every woman, too.

"To be dedicated to the truth complicates life. In my case it has nothing to do with virtue, for I simply cannot do otherwise."

Count Michael Karolyi
letter to his wife, Catherine

A LIFE TOGETHER, The Memoirs of
Catherine Karolyi

"The combination of insight and the ability to speak the truth is the remedy for self-deception."

PSYCHOLOGY TODAY
January, 1987

"Life must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backward."

Kierkegaard

"The truth isn't always beauty, but the hunger for it is."

Nadine Gordimer
THE ESSENTIAL GESTURE

CHAPTER 1

1951

VICE KING MURDERED

Writ large across the front page of the Hammond Times the headline bordered in black; a picture of the deceased below the announcement:

Sunday morning at 3:30 a.m. Bart Mindel's bullet riddled body was discovered by his wife, Elizabeth, at the side door leading to the attached garage of his Forest Hills home. An unidentified source alleged that the murder was a gangland slaying. Mindel, owner of six local taverns and one nightclub, is reputed to be a member of the Mafia. The assailant or assailants are unknown according to a police report. Mindel, forty-seven, is survived by his wife, Elizabeth forty-two, his daughter Sarah Mindel Shallot twenty-two, and twin grandsons sons, Joshua and Jonathan, aged two.

Bart Mindel's daughter Sarah reread the headline VICE KING MURDERED and held her breath as fear and trepidation crisscrossed her face. Her body trembled from lack of air and she breathed deeply and coughed. Horror like this happens to other people, not to my family. Her voice quavered as she vowed aloud, "One day I swear I'll redeem my father's reputation." Bart had told her repeatedly, "The only thing a man really owns is his good reputation." Now Bart had been deprived of that. His daughter intended to prove beyond a doubt that he was not and never had been a criminal.

Sarah stood facing the fireplace in the living room of her parent's well-appointed home her face grimaced in pain and disbelief. IT'S LIES. IT'S ALL LIES. Her hands trembled as she held the loathsome paper away from her face. She considered flinging it into the fireplace and lighting a match to it, but the paper slipped silently from her nervous fingers to the carpeted floor.

She automatically bent over to retrieve it. Her mother always scolded her if anything

was left out of place. This time rather than pick up the out of place item, Sarah sat down beside it, her elbows resting on her bent knees, her palms pressed against her closed eyes. She ran her slender fingers through her hair twisted a curl and searched for a memory of the last time she had seen her father alive. It took less than a second to recall the evening less than a week ago. She'd been half way out the kitchen door of her parent's home when her father had called her back saying in a hurt voice, "Sarah, you forgot to kiss me good-by!"

Sarah blushed as she turned back to her father still seated at the dinette table and moved closer to him saying "I'm so sorry Daddy. I have so much on my mind. The twins keep me so busy and with Bob in law school he doesn't have much time to help me. If he hadn't been home this evening I wouldn't even have had the time to stop over to see you."

"You never forgot to kiss me good-bye before, Sarah," Bart said in a hurt voice.

"And I never will again. I promise. I'm really truly sorry, Daddy," she said as she kissed him on the top of his baldhead. Bart's particular odor of cigar tobacco, talcum powder and perspiration whiffed up to Sarah's nostrils and she smiled as she said with sincerity, "I love you so much, Daddy. How could I ever have forgotten to kiss you goodbye. It will never ever happen again. I promise. See you soon Daddy dear." She blew him a kiss and closed the kitchen door behind her.

Sniffing as she remembered she grabbed her hankie, tucked at the bottom of her blouse sleeve, and blew her nose. If I hadn't forgotten to kiss my Dad goodbye I might never have remembered the last time I saw him alive. Sarah wiped her nose, and pressed the hankie across her closed mouth as if to stifle the unborn screams in her throat. The pain of losing her Daddy seemed unbearable. She knew she'd miss her father for the rest of her life.

In 1935 Hitler renounced the Versailles Treaty, Social Security was enacted and seven-year-old Sarah watched the black and white newsreel at the Paramount Theatre in downtown Hammond, Indiana. She didn't understand the significance of those facts but she always enjoyed the Saturday episode of Buck Rogers and his flying machine before the feature film began.

Sarah loved the movies, but her favorite entertainment was at home when she sat on the closed toilet seat and watched her Daddy prepare his unshaven bristled face for the evening. "You know I have to look neat when I leave for work." Sarah watched intensely as Daddy leaned closer to the mirror and trimmed his mustache. To her the mustache looked like two black lines, two pointing upward to his nose and two pointing to his ears. Hair grew all over Bart like a hirsute vest. It enveloped his chest, back, arms, and hands, everywhere except on the top of his head. It curled under his double chin and poked out above the double starched stiff white shirts he always wore. His neck was permanently red and raw from this self-inflicted punishment. "I detest shaving twice a day, he'd confide to his daughter as he dusted his blue/black stubble with a woman's powder puff. His wife always provided the talcum that topped the puff from her powder box. It was a nightly ritual. The dusty white powder temporarily clouded the mirror, and Bart wiped it off with a clean towel. Then he slid his hand through what remained of the shiny black hair on his head. He turned towards Sarah, leaned over and rubbed the stubble of his beard against her face and bit her apple-cheek until she squealed with pain and pleasure. Bart pulled on his suit jacket and Sarah watched her Daddy tuck his rimless glasses and his gold plated fountain pen into the left breast pocket of his black pin-striped suit jacket. Then he carefully folded a red silk handkerchief into a triangle and placed it in the right pocket. He patted it and grinning he said, "This one's for show." Then he shoved a clean white hankie into his trouser pocket. "This one is for blow!" he chuckled.

Bart walked briskly down the hall towards the kitchen and the back door that opened to the

attached two-car garage. Sarah followed snug behind him. His hand was on the door knob when Elizabeth asked, “What time will you be coming home from work?”

“How the hell should I know? Why do you always ask? You know it depends on how good business is. Bart’s temper was as quick and spontaneous as his rollicking sense of fun.

“You know I’m killing myself for you and Sarah” he bellowed.

Then raising an eyebrow, his mercurial eyes sparkling blue, he barked, “Be good girls” and slammed out the kitchen door. The house always seemed empty whenever Daddy left.

CHAPTER 2

Bart Mindel was a “Travlin’ Man.” He lived and died in the fast lane. He traveled from his wife’s bed in the toney part of town in notorious Calumet City to his mistress’s chaise lounge. Sylvia, Bart’s long-time paramour did double-duty; she also managed Bart’s Dog House, his business headquarters. He relished observing his name in bright red neon lights high above the entrance of his favorite tavern. From Bart’s Dog House he supervised his kingdom of five taverns, and one nightclub. For the cabaret he booked performers like Sally Rand, the fan dance queen of yesteryear, and other entertainers. Locating has-been-acts at reasonable prices pleased Bart and he relished his small part in show biz.

Bart had won first place in a song and dance contest at a local theater in Hammond when he was ten-years-old. The first prize was a tour with a vaudeville troupe that traveled across the U.S. His parents, however, thought he was far too young to go on the road. Bart at ten and small for his age wasn’t prepared to run away from home like Al Jolson. With no alternative he fussed but acquiesced to his parents’ directive. Bart, however, never gave up his dream of stardom. For the rest of his life he carried a newspaper clipping of the event in his wallet. In his twenties Bart could have been Charlie Chaplin’s double. He too was Napoleon sized. He too was dark haired, handsome and talented. His deep-throated bass voice was a gift from God. He was also a comedian. Bart exaggerated mundane events, with superb timing and he always received the applause and laughter that he craved. His audience laughed at his antics until tears cascaded down their cheeks.

By the time Bart had perfected his routine of singing and story-telling he was a married man of twenty-six with a one-year-old daughter. He knew then he had to support his family, and didn’t have the time or luxury to augment his dream of

singing and dancing for a living. The 1929 Depression had hit and earning enough to keep food on the table was difficult enough.

To earn that living Bart turned his attention to business, ideas the backbone of his many attempts to earn a profit. He began by selling Christmas trees in bitter cold weather. He opened and closed an ice cream parlor, a sandwich shop, and a hosiery store. He finally found his niche when he purchased his deceased father's corner tavern from his older brother, Harry. Harry had inherited all of their father's assets, following the European tradition of the eldest son inheriting the father's entire estate. Bart, the youngest of five children, only inherited his father's solid gold pocket watch, a small statuette of three monkeys "See no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil." His wife detested that statue, but she admired the business acumen her husband had learned from his father.

Bart loved and appreciated his father and was forever grateful that Max had changed his name. Bart's Russian born mother had named her son, Bartholomew, a good Jewish name, but his German born father called him Bart. "Bartholomew is a sissy boy's name," Max informed his wife. He insisted his son henceforth be called Bart. Bart's mother gave in but she nicknamed her son, Pussy. When she called "Pussy, Pussy, come home" from her upstairs kitchen above Max's tavern below, her son blushed in embarrassment.

Bart purchased his father's corner tavern in Hammond in 1934. In 1937 he sold it and purchased a tavern across the state line in Calumet City. The bars in Hammond closed promptly at 2 a.m. while the bars in Cal City were opened legally until 3 a.m. By the time America entered World war 11 in 1941, Bart owned three taverns with a fourth in escrow. By the third year of the war, Bart had earned enough money to purchase his plum, a former brick bank building that he renovated into the Marathon, a fashionable supper club that featured live entertainment.

Bart was a workaholic before the term was coined. He worked until three or four a.m., and was back by noon the following day no matter how little sleep he'd had. His first stop was always the Dog House, and the first items he checked were the bottles of liquor he'd marked the night before. He'd turn each liquor bottle over to ascertain whether his bar girls were drinking up his profit. God help the help if any B-girl was caught nipping at his stock; she was fired immediately.

Bart made a wise decision when he moved to Calumet City. With a pay-off to the cops Bart kept the big spenders in a back room, and he'd stay open all night if the moneyed patrons still had big bucks to fork over. Front bar or back room Bart entertained with his theme song, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the song made famous by Bessie Smith. The audience drunk or sober agreed that Bart's voice was the best. During the war, sailors from as far away as Great Lakes Naval Station flocked to BART'S DOG HOUSE to hear him sing. They appreciated Bart's considerable talent.

Sporadically Bart drank too much booze with customers and stayed away from home for a couple of days to sober up at the schvitz, a Jewish steam bath. Bart also avoided his family to play high stake poker with friends or to couple with his mistress on the oversized chaise lounge that he'd purchased for her. Sylvia, unlike his fashionable wife, was always ready with a couple of drinks and a jolly good time. She knew from experience a hard man was good to find.

Bart couldn't sober up, or drink at home. Elizabeth hated her husband's over-indulgence and allowed no liquor in her house. She did cook Bart's favorite meals. He loved her chicken soup and homemade noodles. She supervised the current maid, and occasionally stayed awake late enough to prepare a snack for her husband when he returned home from work. Elizabeth knew about Sylvia, but in the 1930's and 40's the average woman overlooked her mate's wandering

eye when she had a comfortable home and her husband rewarded her with cash, furs, jewelry and great vacations.

Bart and Sarah had a special affinity, the bond between them strengthened by their enthusiasm for adventures large or small. Sometimes when Bart had errands to run, he'd invite his daughter to join him; Sarah jumped at any chance to be alone with Daddy and he was proud to introduce his pretty, polite, and well-dressed daughter to his friends and associates, the owners of the pawnshop, the barbershop, and other businessmen who were his customers. Sarah even accompanied her father to the Dog House on occasion.

As a teen-ager Sarah attended wrestling matches and horror movies with her dad. There was always abundant merriment when father and daughter spent time alone. Bart recognized that his daughter was his mirror image. They both thrived on excitement. When father and daughter were enjoying themselves, Bart had no temper tantrums. At home it was a different story.

CHAPTER 3

Bart made all the arrangements. “El,” he said, “you take care of the twins until Bob comes home from law school. I’m taking my daughter out for a whole day of celebration on her twenty-first birthday.”

Bart’s highly-polished black four-door Cadillac sedan with the large fins in the rear was his pride and joy. He sat high on the cushion beneath him. He needed the boost to see above the leather-covered steering wheel. Turning toward Sarah, he grinned and asked, “What are we going to do today, Sarah? It’s your day. You call the shots. How about we go to the Loop and I buy you twenty-one presents?”

Sarah’s eyes sparkled as she regarded her father with undisguised love and said, “I don’t care, Dad. I just want to be with you.”

“Okay. Off we go.” Bart said as he gunned the motor and backed out of the driveway. Bart, already in high gear, turned on the radio and sang along with Al Jolson. “*Oh, the sun shines east and the sun shines west,*” he crooned and soon his voice rose above Jolson’s. Sarah turned her face towards her father, her voice filled with pride and admiration said, “Daddy, your voice is much, much better than his. I’d rather listen to you sing any day.”

Bart grinned as he turned off the radio, his hand tapping out the rhythm on the steering wheel as he warbled, “*I saaid, a GOOD man isss hard to find.*” Sarah knew it was going to be a great day.

Father and daughter were silent as they neared Chicago’s Loop. Sarah stared out the car window at a drunk wearing a threadbare, oversized coat as he staggered down the street. She noticed other men huddled in doorways as the wind ruffled their shirts on this crisp-cold December day. The hand-lettered sign in the window near them read: Full Shot and Beer 15 Cents.

At the next traffic-light, she watched as a man's ripped trousers dropped to his knees, his shabby bright yellow shorts in sharp contrast to the somber sky. Before the signal light turned green the drunk hoisted up his britches with one hand, and thumbed his nose at a passerby with the other.

Sarah's eyes were glued to the gray overcast buildings that formed a tunnel to Lake Michigan. The fire-escapes looked like latticework and the elaborate gargoyle on one building intrigued Sarah, the budding artist. Bart drove a few blocks out of his way so Sarah could see the bright red Christmas bows tied around the lion's necks in front of the Chicago Art Institute. The splendor of Michigan Avenue faded, as Bart turned left at Randolph Street. On Wabash Avenue the rust-colored L-tracks overhead formed the outer-boundary of the Loop.

Men and women, wearing Salvation Army blue, rang bells on street corners as they stood shivering beside their red collection buckets. People rushed along the sidewalk, their arms filled with packages, their bodies bent against the wind, mist puffing like smoke with every breath.

Bart parked the Caddy at his favorite spot, three long blocks away from the Chicago Theater. "I prefer this parking lot because it's covered," he informed his daughter, without mentioning that it was less expensive. "I don't want any punks messing with my car. Besides the walk will do us good."

Father and daughter held hands and swung their arms in unison as they trotted back to Randolph Street. "Are you having fun?" Bart asked, as he squeezed Sarah's hand. She held tight to his hand like a little girl and replied, "I always have fun when I'm with you, Dad." Every store window they passed displayed a Christmas tableau—all the pageantry of Christmas in a glass frame. Santa Claus laughed in countless windows, his motorized belly shaking with manufactured mirth. At the corner of State and Randolph, Sarah eyed the Marshall Field clock and thought, good, it's only 10:30 in the morning. I'll have hours and hours with my Daddy. Entering Fields, she smiled in delight as if the department store had been decorated in honor of

her birthday. Garlands were festooned with red satin ribbon. Gold- and silver-colored ornaments sparkled against a live green spruce ten stories high. Enormous red bowls were filled to overflowing with poinsettias.

The counters were jam-packed with bracelets, bangles, locket, and brooches. Wood and glass cases held multi-colored ribbon alongside bits of patterned lace. The counter tops were covered with patterned scarves and mittens, as well as leather gloves in white, black, red and navy. Wool and cashmere sweaters vied for attention, as a floor-walker slipped his hand down his tie and rounded the corner of a display case filled with brocade and bugle beads.

“Sarah’s eyes widened, “Okay, Dad, what’s up? You hate to shop.”

“Today is your birthday and I intend to make it’s very special. Today, you’re twenty-one and I’m buying you twenty-one presents. You can choose whatever you want.”

Sarah giggled, “Thanks a lot, but I don’t need anything.”

“Are you kidding?” Bart answered as he fingered the black skunk fur coat puffing out Sarah’s delicate frame. “I bought you that coat for your sixteenth birthday, didn’t I? Well, what have you got on under it?”

“Oh, some of the clothes you bought me before I was married.”

“Bob should have bought you new clothes by now.”

“Daddy, he’s not working. He’s in law school.”

“Well, so he can’t. But I can. Let’s go.”

The escalator stopped at every floor, and so did Bart and Sarah. Usually impatient, Bart waited as Sarah fingered blouses and tried on shoes. She rejected every offer of, “Do you want this, Sweetheart?”

“No, Daddy. Thanks. It’s really nice, but no thank you.”

After an hour, without making a purchase, father and daughter descended in the elevator and walked out the revolving doors to State Street. Outside again they stopped long enough to

enjoy Field's window display. Imitation snow lay beneath the artificial Christmas tree. Surrounding the base were boxes wrapped in multi colored paper and tied with ribbon. Child-sized mannequins dressed in lace trimmed Victorian style nightgowns wore lace caps on their golden curls and knelt before a paper-mâché fireplace. Red flannel stockings stuffed to overflowing hung from the mantel.

Two coins pinged together into the Salvation Army bucket outside the store as Bart dropped in his Christmas spirit. Then he and Sarah headed for Carson's. Inside that department store Sarah refused all the displayed clothing and accessories "Oh, yes, Daddy, I liked this and that but it's all too expensive."

"Sarah, stop looking at the price tags. You're not with your mother. You can have anything you want. Why do you keep refusing?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes, damn it, times-a-wastin'. What the hell is it?"

"I'm just so happy to be with you. Besides, when you gave me this skunk coat you told me I was greedy and spoiled." Sarah rubbed the collar with her fingertip and added, "I never asked for this. Mom picked it out."

"That's been bugging you all these years? I was only teasing when I said you were greedy. You're not greedy, spoiled, or anything else. You know I like to tease you," Bart said as he pinched his daughter's cheek.

"I thought you meant it."

Bart winked at Sarah and said, "Okay, Baby, I've got the picture. Now, goddammit, c'mon. The next thing you say you like, I'm buying. We've wasted too much time already."

Out on the sidewalk once more, Bart dragged Sarah past Mandel's. "Your mother says that's where the maids shop. We're not going in there. Remember your first high school dance and those goofy clothes you bought at Mandel's with the money I gave you?"

“I remember. I shopped in every bargain basement, and when you saw me in that skirt and sweater, you told me I looked like a B-girl. You handed me twice as much money as you had the first time and said, “No more cheap stuff. Go out and buy yourself an Angora sweater.” I did, and it itched and left furlike stuff all over my skirt.”

“Well, Baby, I’m with you this time and you’re going to get some classy duds the first time around.” Bart glanced at his watch, the diamonds marking the hours, and said, “It’s almost one o’clock. I’m getting hungry.” He grabbed Sarah’s elbow and steered her through the crowded sidewalk and said, “Let’s move, honey.” In Steven’s, a more exclusive shop, Bart bought Sarah a two-tone gray gabardine suit and a three-piece green tweed one. In less than an hour and a half, he paid for a white silk blouse with small pearl buttons down the front, green alligator shoes with a matching purse, and a black suede fedora to match his own. Next came hankies with her initial, a leather belt, a cashmere sweater and scarf, and fur-lined gloves. At two-thirty Bart paid for a gold locket with a diamond in the center. Then he turned to her abruptly and said, “Okay, that’s it, Sarah. I’m starving. Let’s eat.”

Their arms filled with packages, Bart and Sarah walked toward one of Bart’s favorite Italian restaurants. Sarah tried to keep up with her father’s fast-paced walk, all the while repeating, “Thanks, Daddy.”

“Okay, Sarah, that’s enough. I’ve got the message.” Bart’s eyes glowed with pleasure. “Hurry up. Let’s move,” he said as he held open the door to Giovanni’s. Father and daughter climbed the narrow steps that led up to the restaurant. They acted as if the twinkling Italian lights on the stairwell had been installed just for them.

They talked through the antipasto, the minestrone soup, and the meatball and mushroom spaghetti. The chatter was briefly interrupted when they spooned their spumoni in a reverent moment of silence. Then Bart pushed his desert dish away, lit a cigar and held it between his

thumb and forefinger. The three-carat diamond on his right pinkie flashed with light from the flickering candle centered on the red and white-checkered tablecloth.

In a mellow mood Bart played with his cigar, rather than gnawing it to bits, the way he did when he was angry. He flicked the thick ash into the remains of the melting spumoni ice cream then snubbed out the cigar in the tin ashtray that had ‘Giovanni’s’ printed on the bottom. No one’s gonna use this food again,” he said with a laugh.”

“What do you want to do now, Baby?”

“Whatever you say, Daddy.”

“Now let’s get out of here. I’m stuffed to the gills. I won’t be able to eat for a month.” He helped Sarah on with her coat and filled her arms with packages, saying, “We’ll go to the Oriental. On the way over I noticed there’s a flick I want to see. *The Life of Al Jolson*, or something like that. Let’s move.”

Settling back to enjoy the movie, Bart and Sarah’s expressions mirrored the actors; they smiled back at the screen when a young Jolson sang in the Shul. All the while stuffing themselves with buttered popcorn, Jujubes, and chocolate covered raisins. At the point in the film when Jolson’s father refused to give his son permission to work in vaudeville, Bart removed his hand from Sarah’s, blew his nose, and wiped a tear from his cheek with the back of his hand.

Tears and laughter bubbled near the surface when the actor playing Jolson sang “Mammy,” and Bart poked Sarah in the ribs with his elbow and grinned. All smiles and laughter again, Bart and Sarah left the theater. “Great movie,” he said. “My life would make a good movie, too. Let’s eat.”

“How can you be hungry, Daddy? All we’ve done all day is eat.”

“And shop . . . all that shopping, walking, talking, and laughing builds up an appetite, Baby”

It was dusk as father and daughter left the theater and they were pleasantly surprised at the fresh layer of snow covering the street and sidewalk. Their arms filled with packages, they joyfully kicked at the snow or left fresh footprints as they walked purposefully down State Street to their favorite exotic restaurant. The fake palm trees in Shangri-La's entrance were in sharp contrast to the snow on their shoes, and they giggled at the incongruity.

The maitre d' led Bart and Sarah to a leather booth with its centerpiece of fake tropical flowers and that prompted Bart to observe, "We're in a tropical paradise, so how come we're chilled to the bone?" Bart laughed as he dumped his packages and Sarah's on one side of the booth and then helped Sarah as she struggled out of her coat. One of her arms remained stuck in the sleeve as Bart yanked. "Hey, Dad," Sarah laughed, "wait a minute. I need both arms for twins!"

They slid into the booth, side by side, across from Sarah's gifts and giggled as Bart surveyed the menu. He ordered egg rolls, fried rice, chicken chow mein, and, what seemed to Sarah the rest of the menu. They sipped hot tea in handle less cups, and when their dinner was placed on the table, Bart served each course from the stainless-steel covered bowls, replacing the lids each time. He continued his stories with each mouthful, his words spilling over with each course.

At last, he pushed his dinner plate away saying, "I can't eat another bite. Good thing we didn't have this meal before we went to the movies or I'd have farted my way through Jolson's songs!"

Sarah giggled whenever her father uttered "fart," a word her mother never used or allowed her to use.

"Sarah, did I ever tell you about that fishing trip with my buddies?"

"Sure, Dad, but tell me again, I love to hear your stories.

“It was hotter than hell, and my bastard fishing buddies, wouldn’t let me roll the car windows down. They just kept repeating ‘It’s okay, Pussy, we’re comfortable.’ Pretty soon, the car stank like hell. I mean it really stunk. Smelled just like someone farted. It was awful. I pleaded with them to roll down the windows. Every time I tried to roll one down, one of those bastards rolled the window back up. I’d try again. No soap. The smell got stronger and stronger, and they all just kept laughing and pointing their finger at me. ‘Boy, Pussy, you sure can let ‘em fly!’ Nothing I said could make them open the windows. Sweat was pouring down my face.” Bart paused to sip his tea and continued, “Finally, I took off my hat to fan myself, and you know what?” He lowered his teacup to the table and locked eyes with Sarah. “Those bastards had put limburger cheese in my hatband! The more I perspired in the heat, the stronger the smell got.”

He held his nose, and let out a low whistle. No matter how many times Sarah heard Bart’s stories, she laughed. With each telling they seemed funnier and richer. “I still can make you laugh, huh, Baby?”

Bart ordered another pot of Chinese tea and continued telling stories, some she had never heard before. “Yeah, Baby, I was running dances when I was only seventeen. I hired the musicians. I ordered the tickets and I fixed the lights. I got the crowd to fill the ballroom to hear me sing. I met your mother at one of those dances. She was a good-looking kid of sixteen. Boy, was she stacked. Most women who have good legs have lousy breasts, or vice-versa, but your mother had both . . . she still does.

“She was built just like Diane, my best B-girl. Remember, you met Diane in the yard between the Dog House and the Poo House. The ‘Poo House’ was a converted garage behind it.

“Honey, how come you call that \$35 a month mansion I rent you the ‘Poo House?’”

“The ‘Poo House’ is short for putrid, Dad. I sweep the kitchen floor and the dust walks away! If it’s not the many-legged creatures taking over my kitchen, it’s the four-legged ones. I

counted thirty-five mice one week. They're getting so tame one morning a mouse stared at me and didn't budge, even when I climbed out of bed."

Bart laughed and said, "You're growing up, Honey. I remember that first mouse you found in the oven. You went home crying to your mother and wouldn't return to your house until Bob got rid of it."

"All this talking has brought back my appetite." Bart laughed as he snapped his fingers for the waiter and ordered French fried bananas for dessert. "I told you, Sarah, about inventing chocolate covered bananas. But before I did anything about it, someone else hit the market with them. If I'd moved faster, I could have been a millionaire. If you ever get a good idea, Sarah, act on it immediately, don't wait for someone else to beat you to the punch!"

Bart dug into desert long enough for Sarah to ask a question.

"Daddy, you mentioned Diane before. She stops over to see the twins once in a while. She used to be beautiful, now her face is all bloated and funny. Is she sick?"

"No, Baby, she's been hitting the bottle." Bart talked to his daughter as if she were his son, while still encouraging her naiveté. She was a married lady, but still his baby.

He blew Sarah a kiss as he removed a cigar band and placed it over Sarah's wedding ring. "Stay as sweet as you are, Baby. Forever."

Bart cracked open his fortune cookie and read aloud, "You were meant to be famous." He sighed, "Sometimes the things you don't do stay with you the longest. I won a song and dance contest when I was a ten-years-old.

A half-hour later, Bart and Sarah were settled in the Caddy. The packages filled with gifts rested in the back seat. Before Bart started the motor, Sarah threw her arms around

her father's neck and said, "This has been the most beautiful day. Thank you for everything."

"We'll do this again. It was a great day for me, too, Baby, even if you did buy everything in sight. I spent a fortune on you!"

"This time I know you're teasing, Pop," Sarah said as she beamed and kissed her father's cheek once again.

Bart drove home in silence. Father and daughter content to be together after a full day. In Calumet City they drove past the Dog House so Bart could check to see if the flashing neon sign had been repaired.

Bart hadn't mentioned business, not once, all day, but as soon as he drove into Cal City, he was all business again. By the time he parked the Cadillac in his driveway it was business as usual. "Dammit!" he exploded as he looked at his French Normandy house with lights blazing in every room. "I keep telling your mother to turn off those damn lights. Electricity costs money. Money doesn't grow on trees."

Sarah bit her lower lip. *If Daddy can't afford electricity, how come he spent so much money on me today?*

Sarah pushed down her guilt and changed the subject. "Look, Dad, the Ford's still here. I guess Bob hasn't taken the twins home yet."

El and Bob met the celebrators at the front door. Bob greeted them with a big smile, kissed his wife on the cheek and asked, "How was it? Did you two have fun?"

"Give us a chance to get our coats off," Bart said, as he tweaked Sarah's nose. "Of course we had fun, right, Baby?"

Bob reached to relieve Sarah of her many packages then kissed her on the lips.

"Bob, oh, Honey, we had such a wonderful time," Sarah chortled then turned to her mother and asked, "How were the boys, Mom?"

“Sarah,” El sighed like she’d never catch another breath, “they never stopped crying or running through every room. I’m exhausted.” El plunked down in an overstuffed chair in the living room, her apron still on over her housedress, strands of blonde hair falling in her eyes.

“I don’t hear them, Mom,” said Sarah in an anxious voice.

“Oh! They’re sleeping now. You’ll never know what I’ve been through. When one stopped crying the other started, sometimes both at once. Since they’ve started walking I can’t keep up with them. I chased them all over the house. Joshua spilled his milk. Jonathan pulled the knob off the radio, and. . . .”

“I know, Ma,” Bob interjected. “It’s really been a hard day for you.” He turned to Sarah. “What are all those packages?”

Sarah’s frown quickly changed back to a smile. “Wait till you see.” She opened each package and held up each article for inspection. “That’s not a good color for you,” said El, as she gazed half-heartedly at Sarah’s new gray suit.

Bob and Sarah gathered up the bottles, the diapers, and the babies and piled in the car for the short drive home. As soon as the twins were settled in their cribs, Bob said, “When I finish law school I’ll buy you lots of clothes, even better than the ones your father bought you today.”

Sarah dropped the last diaper in the bathroom pail to soak and turned to Bob who was standing behind her. She wrapped her arms around him and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. “You don’t have to buy me anything. I love being your wife, being with you.”

Bob held her close, his chin propped atop her head. “But I will, Sarah, I will.”

CHAPTER 4

On Sarah's twenty-second birthday her father presented her with a two carat, rare yellow toned diamond ring. I couldn't afford to give you an engagement ring but I can, Bart said as he slid the huge diamond onto Sarah's ring finger. Her elation was tempered by Bob's obvious frustration when he observed the present. Elizabeth's resentment and pride splayed across her face.

At home in the Poo House, after the twins were tucked in their cribs, Bob stared at the diamond on his wife's hand and said, "after I graduate from law school in June and find a good job I'll buy you a diamond larger than that."

"Honey, please don't feel bad about this gift. Dad said it was just a ring he'd kept to secure a loan, and the loan wasn't paid off so he gave it to me. Besides, it's a yellow diamond the color of pee." Sarah giggled. I don't care about diamonds. It's you I love." Bob hugged his wife, and said, "you're the greatest you'll see, I'll buy you an enormous diamond for your ring finger and a gigantic one for the center of the silk turban I'll buy for you." Bob graduated at the top of his class basking in the praise and approval of his wife, his parents, John and Agnes, his three older sisters, and his youngest sister, Louise.

In the following weeks Bob, determined to find a job walked from one end of LaSalle Street to the other and stopped at the largest law firms. By the end of July he announced in disgust, "They all offer me the same thing, Sarah, \$60 to \$65 a week and all the ink I can drink. The hell with it."

Bob's boss offered to move him from an insurance adjuster at Security Mutual, where he'd worked part-time for his last two years of law school, to a position in the law department.

With a salary increase to \$75 a week and an offer to trade in the company Ford he'd been assigned for a new 1951 model. Bob discussed the offer with Sarah, and when she agreed he accepted the job.

Sarah budgeted their \$310 monthly income to cover the cost of rent, food, and clothing for the twins, and she did so with the good judgment she used while managing \$110 a month that Bob had received from the G.I. bill. She even saved \$10 each month, and Bob was quick to compliment her. "You really know how to stretch a dollar, Honey."

With the pressure of law school exams, passing the bar, and job hunting behind him, Bob was more relaxed than he'd been in years. "Our worst days are behind us," he confided, "we're on our way."

Their worst days—and nights—began two weeks later on September 15th.

Sleeping soundly, curled up in Bob's arms, Sarah was jarred awake with the repeated peals of the wailing telephone. She sat bolt-upright in bed, shivered, and shook Bob awake. "Something's wrong, Bob. Bob . . . WAKE UP! Something's wrong. I know it. Please, please answer the phone."

She watched Bob run barefoot toward the living room while shrill rings reverberated throughout the house. Filled with foreboding, she sat up in bed wringing her hands, afraid that the phone would never be silenced. Bob picked up the receiver in mid-ring, and quacked hello. "Oh, my God," he gasped. "We'll be there right away."

Tense and fearful, Sarah wrapped her arms around her shoulders and stared at Bob who stood at the foot of their bed, his face expressionless. "Who?" she asked. "What?"

"Get dressed, Sarah, we're going to your mother's. Just wrap a blanket around the twins, and try not to wake them."

The street lights shimmered in the early morning mist, the car's headlights washing a wide angle through the dark, empty streets. Bob's hands gripped the steering wheel, his eyes on the road ahead, his only words, "Your mother said, 'Come quick' and then she hung up." Sarah shivered and squeezed Josh tight in her arms. There was no sound from Johnny, still asleep and tucked into the twin-sized car bed in the back seat.

Silence and fear mingled to create an invisible barrier between husband and wife as the car turned onto Lawnview. Sarah winced as she stared straight ahead at red lights spinning in the pre-dawn haze. "Police! Why? Bob, tell me why?"

A uniformed policeman stood at the curb and waited. The beam from his flashlight threw an arc of shadows against the curb as Sarah opened the car door, Josh still clutched tight in her arms. The officer gripped Sarah's elbow as she tried to push past him, his firm command prevented her movement.

"No," he ordered. "No, not the garage door. Come with me," he whispered, as he guided Sarah through the dark street to the front door.

Bob gently placed the car bed, with Johnny in it, on the living room carpet and rushed to his mother-in-law's side. She threw her arms around him and keened. "Thank God, you're here." Sarah, paralyzed with fear, her feet rooted to the carpet, tightened her grip around Josh, her eyes wide with terror, her heart pounding wildly as she waited for the officer to speak.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Mindel," he said, "but I must ask you some questions now that your daughter and her husband have arrived."

Elizabeth had dressed hurriedly after she'd called the police, and now she looked uncharacteristically disheveled. Her blond hair was matted from the hairnet she'd obviously worn, her hose bagged at the knees. Her arms were crossed tightly across her breasts and the knuckles on her hands bulged as she gripped her shoulders while answering the police officer's questions.

In a terse voice she recited, “He screamed. I was asleep. He screamed my name, EIIIIII. I ran to the kitchen. I couldn’t find my glasses . . . I called police. I called my son-in-law . . . I was confused. If I’d only moved faster—I tripped on the hem of my nightie—I could have saved him . . . glasses . . . I looked out the kitchen window . . . keys in his hand . . . face covered with blood. No face. I moved too slow . . . I could have saved him. If I’d opened door, he’d be alive now. Last month he drove up on the lawn. You can still see the tire marks. He told me not to worry . . . he told me everything would be all right . . . he screamed.”

By 6:30 the police were gone. Drained of what little emotion she had left, Elizabeth collapsed in a heap on the living room sofa. Sarah located a blanket in the hall closet and gently covered her mother, checked on the twins, who were asleep in her old bedroom, and smiled wanly at Bob, who was already asleep in the twin bed next to theirs. In a stupor, Sarah moved to the den and sat fully dressed on the edge of the couch. With the toe of one tennis shoe, she pushed at the heel of the other. Both shoes off, she pulled a light afghan over her and laid down full-length and stared at the oversized calendar tacked to the wall over the makeshift bed. Her eyes focused on the number 15, as if it were the only date on the calendar. Glancing at the bucolic scene atop the page, she whispered the date, “September 15, 1951.”

At 4 P.M. Bob, who had taken care of the twins and their needs all day, put them down to nap. He found Sarah in the living room, her back to him as she stood at the fireplace holding the *Hammond Times*. “It’s lies,” she moaned, “filthy lies. All of it.” Sarah fisted the newspaper into a tight ball and flung it into the fireplace. She set match to paper and watched it curl and burst into flame. She grimaced, in response to a cold, fearful shudder that had worked its way down her back. Was she having a nightmare or was this reality? As Bob spoke her name, she turned to him, her jaw thrust forward, her hands fisted, her words gritted through her teeth, “LIES! It’s all LIES. He was the victim.”

“We’re all victims,” Bob said, as he held out his arms. Sarah crawled into them and wept against his shoulder.

A half an hour later Sarah drove, dazed and miserable, to the “Poo House” with the twins. She collected clothes and toys, shirts, ties, and clean underwear. Then she drove the twins to her cousin’s house. Lois had volunteered to care for the boys until after the funeral.

On the return trip to her mother’s house, Sarah was appalled to find cars lined up on both sides of the street, fingers pointing from every open car window. “Yeah, that’s the house. That’s the spot they found his body, right next to the garage.”

Distracted, Sarah drove into a half-empty space in front of the house as a car pulled away from the curb. She cursed as her front bumper punished the rear bumper of the car ahead. The woman at the wheel poked her face out the window, glared, and shouted, “What’s the hurry, lady? There’s room for everyone.”

“I live here,” Sarah shouted back. The woman cringed and pressed her foot to the accelerator, tires squealing as the car sped away.

Before Sarah reached the safety of the front door, she heard other voices. “Yeah, that’s her. That’s the daughter. I saw her picture in the paper.”

Sarah pushed the door closed behind her, but not before she heard, “He was a bastard. He had it coming.” She leaned her head against the door frame, grateful that the twins weren’t with her, that her children had not witnessed this calamity. Entering the house, Sarah tore through every room yanking curtains and drapes closed in a desperate effort to blot out the view of passing cars.

She mumbled hello to Aunt Esther, who was stirring something at the kitchen stove. Aimlessly she drifted from room to room in the house that she still called home. Compulsive thoughts echoed in her mind: “This isn’t happening. It’s not real. I’ll wake up and everything

will be normal.” Covering her face with her hands, Sarah bit her lower lip and listened to the bang, bang, bang of her mother’s head against the bedroom wall.

Elizabeth had taken to her bed the morning after Bart’s death. With eyes unfocused, her rigid body leaned against two propped up pillows. She had not uttered a word since the police left. Her only sound was that eerie, repetitive banging on the wall with her head. El’s beat became a metronome to *Swan Lake* spinning on the phonograph in the living room.

Cautiously, Sarah removed the record. From the bedroom Elizabeth yelled her first words, without missing one beat of her head. “Leave record on,” she ordered, and for the next three tortuous days, *Swan Lake* played over and over and over again. That music clung to Sarah’s memory. For the rest of her life she could never again hear *Swan Lake* without shuddering.

On the second morning after the murder, Sarah moved slowly through the living room, fluffing up pillows on the overstuffed Chippendale sofa, picking up a dropped magazine and restoring it to its rightful place on the inlaid marqueteries coffee table. On the floor lay a two-day-old newspaper, one that Bart might have read. Rather than burn it, Sarah stacked the paper in the garage as though she were completing an unfinished task. She averted her eyes from the garage door as she climbed the inside steps to the kitchen.

She paced through the kitchen, the dining room, the den, back to the kitchen, and then to the living room. Waiting. Waiting for something, someone. Waiting for Bart to walk into the room and say, “Hi, Baby.” Sarah’s face scrunched in pain, her left fist pushed against her nose, her right arm clutched her stomach as she doubled over in wracking sobs. Aunt Esther, El’s older sister, rushed to Sarah and whispered, “You’ll disturb your mother, Sarah. Stop crying.”

Sarah stopped, and felt more alone than ever. She had neither sister nor brother—no one to share her sorrow. She knew Bob loved her and her father, yet even he could not understand her loss.

Sarah stood beside her mother's bed, watching in misery as her mother's head thrust forward and then back against the wall with that heart-stopping bang. Elizabeth's response to her husband's death was summed up in that rhythmic beat, a vivid and pathetic Morse code of shock, helplessness, and bewilderment. She bent low over her mother's rigid form and whispered, "Mom, can I do anything for you? Can I bring you something to eat?"

There was no response as Elizabeth's head rocked back and forth against the wall. Shadowed memories of times past when her mother had taken to her bed and refused to answer questions arced their way through Sarah's consciousness like small meteors, and she felt abandoned.

Like a soldier preparing for battle, Sarah drew back her shoulders and coached herself. "Be strong. Mother needs me." There was no thought of her own needs as she worried over the many decisions that must be made. With an aching heart Sarah looked back down at her mother. Elizabeth's eyes were open but unfocused; Sarah wondered if her mother recognized her, or even knew she was in the room.

Sarah huddled on the closed toilet seat, locked away from the well-meaning relatives who intruded with their own grief and inquired about her mother. Sarah was, at least for a while, locked away from reporters who telephoned or pounded on the door. Locked away, for the moment, from making another decision.

Since her father's death, she had made one decision after another. The funeral director had come to the house and asked, "How much do you want to spend on the casket?" The cemetery representative had come to the house and asked, "Which plot do you prefer? Do you

want one or two? You really should plan ahead for your mother. I know she'd want to be buried next to your father."

Sarah had no idea what her mother wanted and Elizabeth was unable to tell her. Sarah's voice was hoarse as she fielded question after question from her parent's friends and relatives who phoned with their expressions of condolence and offers of food and comfort.

There was no comfort for Sarah. She could lock herself away from people but not from grief. Now her lower lip dragged down and exposed her bottom teeth as she sucked in her breath and grimaced, longing to discuss all the problems with her mother. With hands pressed between her thighs she rocked back and forth, all sobs suppressed, no sounds to disturb Elizabeth.

Sarah was fearful and inexperienced—she was only twenty-two. She fretted, afraid that her mother would find fault with her decisions. Elizabeth and Bob both thought they always knew what was best for Sarah and she had followed their directives. Until now. Periodically, Sarah tip-toed into her mother's bedroom seeking advice. None was available. Elizabeth remained frozen in her own nightmare.

Panic, grief, and memories kept Sarah company in the locked haven of the bathroom until Aunt Esther knocked on the door and asked, "Are you all right, Sarah?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute."

Five minutes later, Aunt Esther rapped on the bathroom door again: "There's someone here to see you," she said. Sarah blew her nose, drew her fingers through her short dark hair, and flushed down the wads of toilet paper she'd used to wipe away her tears.

In the living room she was greeted by a uniformed policeman. "I discovered your father's body, Miss," he said. "He must have been ambushed; the grass behind the bushes next to the driveway was trampled. He was shot about twenty times, ten times in the face. Here," the officer said, and shoved a paper bag toward Sarah. "Here are his personal effects."

Sarah recoiled in horror as the paper bag slipped from her hands, spilling the contents in a jumble on the carpet. She dropped to her knees and, one by one, she retrieved her father's rimless glasses, his gold fountain pen, his pleated hankie, his soiled handkerchief, and returned them to the paper bag. On her knees she collected what remained of her father and fondled the soft leather of his wallet before she returned it to the paper bag. Then she gulped "Excuse me" and rushed to the bathroom to gag over the toilet bowl.

The following evening, Sarah and Aunt Esther dressed Elizabeth's mannequin form, swathed her face with black veils, and helped her into the waiting car. At the funeral home, Bob and Sarah supported a rigid Elizabeth between them as they walked past staring strangers who lined the sidewalk outside Simon's Funeral Home. Inside, they sandwiched Elizabeth between them until Uncle Josh, El's younger brother, offered to drive his sister home.

Elizabeth did not return to the funeral home. Bob and Sarah walked among relatives and friends acknowledging condolences. Sarah, convinced that the faces she couldn't identify were patrons of the DOG HOUSE or KING TUT'S HUT, was unaware that the crowded funeral home was overrun with morbidly curious strangers.

Sarah did recognize Madeline, although she hadn't seen her for years. Dressed in black, Madeline stood near the casket and sobbed beneath her black-veiled hat. The gall of that woman, Sarah thought. She had her nerve coming to the funeral parlor at all, let alone dressed like the widow. At that moment Sarah despised Madeline. She'd always hated the knowledge that Madeline had once been her father's mistress. As a child she'd met Madeline and adored her. Now she was consumed with shame. She glared across the room at the woman her mother called *shtunk*. Madeline's a stinker all right, Sarah thought, and moved as far away from this interloper as she could, considering the crowded room. She was grateful that her mother had left the funeral home and had not witnessed Madeline's display of bad taste.

Yet another relative hugged and kissed Sarah and whispered “You must be brave, for your mother’s sake,” while friends of the family counseled “Your mother needs you now; you’re all she’s got. You have to be strong, for her.” Sarah ached for someone, anyone, to be solicitous of her needs. She walked through the crowded room, her eyes searching for one friend of her own, her eyes scrupulously avoiding the closed casket. Dazed, Sarah shook hand after hand and murmured “Thank you for coming.” Her words and actions dissembled as she went through the motions of doing her duty.

As the crowd dissipated, Sarah forced herself to the casket and stood facing the ornate filigreed coffin. Dry-eyed, she touched the casket with one tentative finger and flinched as someone gently tapped her arm. She turned abruptly and stared into the eyes of her best friend. She flung her arms around Natalie, “You’re here at last,” she sighed. Then she hugged Mona, who stood silently next to Nat. “You two are the only friends who even bothered to be here. Where are the others?” Sarah, secretary of her high school senior class and voted “friendliest girl,” looked perplexed as she asked, “Where’s Cyndy? Mary? Tom?”

Nat hugged Sarah again, excused the others, and added, “I liked your father. He was always good to me. I don’t care what the papers wrote. Your father was a good man.” Mona remained silent.

Sarah’s eyes were question marks as she turned to Mona and asked, “You don’t believe what they wrote in the papers? None of it’s true, you know. My father was not a member of the Syndicate. It’s all lies. Lies.”

“Sure, Sarah,” Mona whispered, as she embraced her friend. Yet over Sarah’s shoulder, Mona, the realist, winked knowingly at Natalie.

The following morning after the funeral service, Sarah counted the cars lined up for the funeral procession. At one hundred, she stopped counting, certain her father must have known

everyone in Hammond, Indiana, and Calumet City, Illinois, the two cities bordering the state line.

She felt certain her father had been loved, without a doubt more than she. None of Sarah's friends attended the funeral, not even Natalie or Mona.

A motorcycle patrolman, in full dress uniform, led the way to the cemetery. The officer stopped traffic at the crossroads and waved more than one hundred and fifty cars through at each intersection. Headlights traced a pattern of light on the wet pavement as mist and rain collected on car windows.

In the back seat of the limousine Elizabeth, dry-eyed and unblinking, sat motionless between Bob and Sarah. The three crestfallen mourners held hands in silence, each in their own private hell. The atmosphere, ominous and forbidding, as rain pelted the limousine windows. Sarah, grim and tearless, stared through the rain-splattered windshield, her eyes glued on the hearse a car-length ahead.

At the graveside, cold drizzle soaked the mourners as the rabbi, who had never laid eyes on Bart, intoned appropriate phrases: "He was a good man...." Bart's casket was lowered into the drenched ground as rain and tears intermingled.

Before leaving the cemetery, Sarah sought out the policeman who had led the procession. She shook his hand and said, "Thank you very much."

"I'm sorry about the loss of your father, Miss. He was a good man; I knew him personally. I used to stop at the DOG HOUSE from time to time after work. You know, Miss, this was the largest funeral procession I ever led."

That evening the relatives gathered at Elizabeth's house but the family quickly separated along defined blood lines. Elizabeth's brothers and sisters huddled in the living room and spoke in hushed tones about the weather, the turnout, and what they'd eaten. Elizabeth sat quietly on the sofa, between her sister Esther and her brother Josh. She held their hands without uttering a

sound. In the dining room, Bart's brothers and sisters, Bob, Sarah, and the Mindel cousins conversed around the extended dining room table, and laughter filled the room at each mention of Bart's name. Sarah pushed her fork through the potato salad on her plate, never lifting it to her mouth.

The Mindels were a loud, gregarious bunch. Ed, Bart's older brother, was the loudest one of all. He was the black sheep, the family joke. During the Depression, Ed had painted sparrows yellow and sold them for canaries and then left town before the paint wore off. Now he held everyone's attention, as Bart once had. He finished up another Bart story with, "Yeah, we were in Mexico and Bart was naked as a jay-bird, ready for bed, when I blew this big, fat, smelly fart. Bart, stark naked, dashed into the hall screaming, 'FIRE' at the top of his lungs. 'Quick, somebody get a fire extinguisher.'" Ed whistled and waved his hand under his nose, and everyone at the table thundered with laughter, including Sarah. "And you remember when he...."

The room hushed as Aunt Esther entered and ordered, "Will you please keep it down? Remember, Elizabeth's in the next room." Then, pointing to Sarah, she scolded, "I'm surprised at you, laughing and eating, when your father's just been buried."

Sarah stared at her aunt and then at her filled plate. She clamped her mouth shut and buried her laughter with her memories of Bart.

Zack, Bart's nephew and favorite relative, glared at Aunt Esther's intrusion and responded, "Bart would have loved us telling stories about his escapades. If he were here, his laugh would have been the loudest. Now he's with us in spirit. We're honoring his memory in our own way. He wouldn't want us to sit around brooding." Sarah agreed with Zack and wished she'd had the nerve to say so.

The evening ended in gloom. The Mindel clan rushing from the house to avoid another confrontation with Elizabeth's relatives. Aunt Esther issued a few more edicts, donned her hat, and ordered Etta, her stepmother, to get a move on. "Come on, Etta, stop dawdling. I want to get home before midnight." Etta looked up at her stepdaughter, only four years her junior, and, ignoring Esther's latest command, searched for Sarah. Finding her in the kitchen drying dishes, Etta hugged Sarah, the step-granddaughter she'd mothered the first year of her life.

"Sarah, mine dear," she said, "let me take your mother home with me for a few days. I've seen her through other times when she's behaved like this."

Sarah bent to kiss the only grandmother she had ever known and said, "Thank you. I'd appreciate that, but tomorrow morning Mom has to testify at the coroner's inquest." Sighing, Sarah mumbled, "I hope she can." Then she wrapped her arms around Etta and said, "You're the only person, besides Bob, who has given me any support. I love you, Grandma, and I appreciate you very much. If you want, we can drop Mom off tomorrow after the inquest."

Photographer's bulbs popped and flashed, temporarily blinding Bob, Sarah, and Elizabeth as they left the coroner's office. Later, the newspapers printed a picture of two women dressed in black, a man between them, supporting them both.

Sarah handed Elizabeth over to Etta at the front entrance of her two-story Victorian house, the home Elizabeth had known since birth. Etta wrapped a protective arm around Elizabeth and invited Sarah and Bob in for tea and cookies.

"Thanks, Grandma, but we can't stay. We have to pick up the twins. We haven't seen them for days."

Patting Sarah's hand, Etta said, "Don't worry mine child, we'll take good care of your mother." Etta wrapped her arm around Elizabeth's waist and led her toward the kitchen with Sarah trailing behind.

"Wait, Grandma," she said. "I want to kiss you both good-bye."

Exhausted, Bob and Sarah drove in silence to Lois's house. They picked up their boys and then drove to Elizabeth's where they gathered up their clothes and toothbrushes, turned on every light in the house, and checked every lock. After stopping briefly for hamburgers, they finally returned to their converted garage behind the DOG HOUSE to spend their first night alone in a week.

Accumulated newspapers lay jumbled outside the front door. Sarah stooped to gather them as Bob opened the screen door. Bart's black shoes, laced together, tumbled from the doorstep and the aglets smarted Sarah's hands as she knelt. Horrified, she flinched and smothered a cry for the twin's sake. She read the note tucked inside one shoe: "The police neglected to return these. Love you, Zack."

Sarah, her teeth chattering as nausea constricted her throat, dumped the newspapers on the hide-a-bed in the living room and asked Bob to hide Bart's shoes from her sight. "I can't deal with anymore today." She bathed the twins, ignoring their chatter, tucked them in bed with a hug and a kiss, and then collapsed in bed beside Bob.

In the morning Sarah awoke to sun streaming through her bedroom window, and for a moment she thought, "It's going to be a beautiful day." Her smile turned sick with remembrance as she heard the twin's cries for "beckfist, Mommy." By an act of will, Sarah shook corn flakes into mismatched bowls, fried Bob an egg over easy, and then dialed her grandmother's number. Etta's voice was reassuring. "Your mother feels much better, Sarah. Not to worry."

"Thank God, thank you, Grandma," Sarah responded. "We'll pick Mom up tomorrow."

The following day, Sarah entered her grandmother's kitchen through the back door and found her mother sitting in a straight-backed chair, ram-rod stiff, and silent. She bent and kissed her mother's cold cheek, but received no response. She waved a hand in front of her mother's

face but Elizabeth didn't blink. Turning to her grandmother Sarah asked in a fearful voice, "How long has she been sitting like this? We've got to do something."

"Don't worry, Sarah," Etta said. "We've seen her like this before. She'll come out of it." Aunt Esther added, "You know she was sick like this for a year after your birth, and we took good care of her, and you. Let her stay with us."

Unwilling to be side-tracked over events she knew nothing about, Sarah avoided discussion and marched to the hall telephone. She dialed information, grateful that she remembered the name of Bart's doctor.

When Dr. Borman picked up the phone, Sarah introduced herself as Bart's daughter and said, "My father was killed last week and now my mother has stopped speaking or moving. She doesn't even blink. I don't know what to do."

"Sounds like she's catatonic."

"Catatonic? What does that mean?"

"Bring your mother to the hospital. Now. I'll meet you at Michael Reese in psychiatric intake."

"Wait, Doctor. How do we get there?"

Sarah returned to the kitchen and ignored the persistent protests, "...but, Sarah, you can't ... but, Sarah ...". In agony but determined, she watched Bob and Uncle Josh gently lift Elizabeth from the chair, her body frozen in a seated position.

The two men bent Elizabeth's rigid body into the back seat of the new Ford, and Etta covered her stepdaughter with a blanket. On her knees, Sarah stretched over the front seat and held her hands against her mother's inflexible body.

"What are you doing?" Bob asked as he turned on the ignition.

"I'm afraid she'll fall to the floor, so I'm holding her."

After ten minutes in that position, Sarah's legs and arms ached, but she remained kneeling until they arrived at Michael Reese Hospital twenty minutes later.

Bob double parked in front of the main building while Sarah ran inside to ask for directions to the psychiatric unit. Once there, Bob and the attendant lifted Elizabeth from the back seat; her chair-formed body slid easily into the waiting wheelchair. Bob wheeled his mother-in-law to admissions and a nurse paged Dr. Borman, who arrived in the lobby shortly thereafter.

Dr. Borman stretched out his hand to Sarah and said, "Your father spoke of you so often. I'm very sorry to hear of his death. I've discussed your mother's condition with Dr. Friedman, the head of the psychiatric department, and he concurs with my diagnosis. Your mother is catatonic and her condition requires shock treatment."

"Shock treatment! Isn't that dangerous?" Sarah asked, her voice quivering with fear.

"Yes, but in her condition it's the only treatment available. I advise you to sign the release form or we cannot be responsible."

Responsible! Sarah fumed as she read the release form. This form specifically denied responsibility for patients who received shock treatment. Trembling, Sarah signed the form, praying she'd made the right decision. Without shock treatment, Dr. Borman had warned, "Your mother could be ill for a year or more. Shock treatment will speed her recovery."

The attendant pushed Elizabeth's wheelchair into the elevator; the elevator door closed, and Sarah felt like an orphan. In less than ten days she had lost both her father and her mother. Elizabeth would receive shock treatment, while Sarah's shocks continued. Bart's lawyer gave Sarah power-of-attorney, yet she felt powerless to alter the direction of her life.

Bart's attorney, Mel Lewin, gave Sarah and Bob sound advice tempered with caution: "Both of you keep tabs of every penny you spend. Write down any amount of money that will

be charged to the estate. Bob, quit your job at Security Mutual and manage Bart's taverns; pay yourself whatever we decide is a fair amount. And you, Sarah, hire a baby-sitter for the twins. You will have lots of running around to do in the next few weeks. Charge the sitter's fee to the estate."

"Mr. Lewin, excuse me for interrupting," Sarah apologized, "but you've given me power-of-attorney and explained what that means, but what do I pay the bills with?"

"The first thing you have to do is find your father's checkbook. With your power-of-attorney, you can sign your father's checks and pay current bills."

Bart's office at the rear of the DOG HOUSE seemed cold and empty; no pictures on the walls, no artifacts on the oversized oak desk, nothing in the room of a personal nature. Bart must have spent hour after hour in this room, yet the office looked permanently vacant.

Sarah moved to the desk and inspected the leather-trimmed desk set; the oversized green blotter in the center had one small ink blot. To the right of the blotter, matching leather folders contained two unpaid liquor bills; the compartments beneath were empty. Not one scrap of paper, not one doodle or scribble marred the pristine desk top. Sarah admired her father's orderly desk but wondered how he kept track of all the details of his business. Her desk at home had scraps of paper spilling over: dates, phone numbers, doodles. Sarah picked up a spindle with a half-dozen impaled liquor bills marked "paid." She slid the bills off the spindle and placed them in the leather folder, then inspected the spindle. The Victorian filigree at the base of the spindle looked familiar and she remembered Bart showing it to her and saying, "This was my father's." She wrapped the spindle in her hankie and placed it in her purse. When her mother got well, she'd ask for this memento.

Sarah pulled open the unlocked center desk drawer, glanced at paper clips, pencils, and rubber bands lined up neatly, and removed her father's checkbook. Opening

it, she gasped at the \$25,000 balance. There's so much, she thought. Now I can pay my mother's hospital and doctor's bills.

Painstakingly Sarah searched each desk drawer, uncertain as to why, or what she was looking for. In a bottom drawer, beneath a stack of bank statements, she discovered a faded valentine signed, "Love always, Madeline." February 14, 1934, was scrawled beneath the signature. In a frenzied rage, Sarah tore the lace-edged valentine to bits. Then she gathered the torn pieces and dumped them in her purse. She'd burn them at home. She didn't want anyone to discover this valentine, especially her mother.

Sarah, along with the manager of the Hammond bank and an appointed deputy from the IRS, counted stacks of green bills removed from Bart's safety-deposit box. The polished oak table in the private bank office was covered with five, ten, fifty, and hundred-dollar bills. The IRS representative pulled a rubber band around ten, one-hundred-dollar bills, laid the thousand dollars on the counted stack, chuckled, winked at Sarah and said, "You're an heiress now, Mrs. Shallot." He laughed at his wit, pushed another pile of uncounted bills toward Sarah and grinned mischievously. Outraged, Sarah ignored the man's insensitivity and silently continued counting twenty-dollar bills.

While one part of her mind counted the money, another part worried about her mother's condition and the twins home alone with a baby-sitter. Sarah's life had changed dramatically in less than two weeks. Two weeks ago she'd been cared for and protected by her husband and father. Her concerns had been typical of a young wife and mother. Now her responsibilities were endless. She wanted her father and mother back, and this idiot winked at her and cracked jokes.

Later, preparing dinner, Sarah complained to Bob, "That idiot ...and then as an afterthought asked, "Am I an heiress? We counted over one-hundred-thousand dollars today,"

amazed that her father had been a wealthy man. With so much money, why had he shouted and complained about the electric bill? The phone bill? And . . .

After dinner Bob, dressed in a suit and tie, left for the DOG HOUSE. Bob's hours at Security Mutual had been cut to half-time, at his request, and so had his salary. Now the estate paid him a fee for managing Bart's taverns, and he arrived home almost as late as Bart had. The twins' physical needs weren't neglected, but now they had exhausted and haggard parents.

Banned from hospital visitation until Elizabeth could see and hear her, Sarah made frequent calls to Dr. Borman to ask about Elizabeth's condition. "When will I be allowed to see my mother?" she'd plaintively ask.

"Your mother has had three shock treatments, but she is still not ready to receive visitors. When she is, I'll let you know."

"Dr. Borman," Sarah pleaded, "my mother can't read without her glasses. I overlooked them when we brought her to the hospital, but I can pick them up at my grandmother's and drop them off at the reception desk."

"Your mother doesn't need her glasses. I'll let you know when she does." Sarah hung up the phone and covered her face with her hands.

For the whole month of October, Sarah was not allowed to visit her mother. Convinced that Elizabeth would never want to return to the house where Bart was murdered, Sarah sorted, packed, and labeled cardboard boxes filled with her mother's possessions.

CHAPTER 5

The Indian summer of 1951 was spectacular. Warm, crisp days, the nostalgic odor of burning leaves, the full harvest moon—a lover’s aphrodisiac. Sarah, oblivious to it all, counted her mother’s sterling silver and packed it with the Irish linen tablecloths and napkins. Exhausting herself by day so she could sleep at night, Sarah invaded her mother’s privacy and her dresser drawers with the erroneous belief that she could bring order to the chaos of their lives. The baby-sitter kept the twins fed and occupied during the day, but at night Sarah prepared dinner, cleaned the kitchen, bathed and mothered the twins, and then, quivering with exhaustion she tumbled into bed beside her husband, too exhausted to even cry. She looked at Bob—his haggard face mirroring her own fatigue—and listened to his complaints.

“It’s really tough managing the taverns without experience. I finally found a second night bartender. But there’s no one who can replace your dad. I don’t know how he kept those late hours for so many years. I’m tired just checking all eight places every afternoon. Thank God I don’t have to spend any more nights behind the bar at the DOG HOUSE listening to those drunks. You wouldn’t believe what I’ve heard. The customers don’t know I’m a relative. They tell stories about Bart. His friends defend him, and I’d hate to repeat what the others say. Business is really good; everyone wants to tell a Bart story. It’s a damn good thing I didn’t find a job in a law office. Security Mutual will hold my full-time job, but there’s no way I could have worked in a law office and attended to your father’s business.” Sarah kissed Bob’s cheek, curled up in his arms, and whispered, “Honey, thank you. I couldn’t have survived all this without you.”

In the morning, Sarah awoke feeling numb, then bottled-up grief came flooding back, and she hated the thought of leaving her bed to face another day of packing. She’d avoided her Father’s closet until she could ignore it no longer. She’d kept Bart’s closet door closed for six weeks while she packed everything else in the house. The morning

Sarah finally opened the closet door, the smell of Bart was so pungent that she sobbed and clung to the sleeve of his blue pin-striped suit, her nose pressed against the cloth for one last scent of her father. She said good-bye to that sleeve as she had been unable to say good-bye to her father in his closed casket. At last, her sobs subsided and she folded her father's suits neatly, placing each gently in its own cleaner's box. She then returned to the closet and counted Bart's thirty-five brightly patterned ties, one for every day of the month and more. She giggled at the florals and the garish designs. These ties were so much like her father, full of zest and exuberance. Others might sneer at Bart's lack of taste, but Sarah appreciated vitality. She hung one tie around her neck, the one with the machine embroidered bulldog emblazoned with sequins. Sarah, part bulldog like her father, had his persistence.

With the last tie packed, Sarah silently vowed—I swear to you, Daddy, one day I'll prove your innocence. With the bulldog tie still around her neck, Sarah locked up the house and headed home to the "Poo House."

Dr. Borman finally gave Sarah permission to visit her mother in the hospital. Now, in addition to the responsibility of two houses and two sons, Sarah added visits to Elizabeth twice a day. Morning and evening she drove twenty miles to Michael Reese Hospital and fretted about adding over eighty miles a day to her mother's car.

Now that Elizabeth's critical voice had returned she querulously demanded answers from her dutiful daughter: "Why am I in this hospital? Why hasn't your father visited me? Sarah, look at me when I speak to you."

Sarah bit her lower lip, stared at the floor and mumbled, "We'll talk about it later, Mom." They never did.

On Sarah's next visit, Elizabeth scolded, "You look terrible. Why don't you get more sleep instead of staying up all night talking to Bob. You have dark circles under your eyes. A woman can't keep her husband if she lets herself go. I never did. I always have a clean housedress, girdle and hose on when your father comes home for dinner. Where is your father? Why hasn't he visited me?"

Sarah choked back her tears, hugged her mother, and promised to return in the evening. On her next visit, Elizabeth asked, “How are the twins? You do have twins, don’t you?” The shock treatment had erased not only the horror of her husband’s death, but other memories as well.

Sarah made an appointment with Dr. Borman’s superior, Dr. James Hawthorne, head of the psychiatric department. Seated in his office, she asked, “Will my mother’s memory ever return?”

“As your mother regains her strength, she will slowly regain her memory. However, she will never be completely well. She has a mild form of schizophrenia; catatonic episodes are one symptom. She also has a personality disorder. Her thought pattern is as rigid as her body was when we admitted her to the hospital. Her opinions are fixed and inflexible. Her paranoia keeps her from trusting others. She thinks you’re after her money.”

Sarah looked down at her inexpensive blouse and skirt, looked up at the doctor and said, “This outfit cost very little—my husband just graduated from law school—but I’m content with it. Money has never been important to me. Can’t my mother be helped with regular therapy?”

“Your mother’s personality disorder is not treatable by therapy,” the doctor said, and looked at Sarah with sympathy. “Her self-righteous demeanor and critical voice are her defenses. She plays you like a violin. She plucks the strings and you quiver. Make a life of your own.”

“How can I? My mother needs care. My grandmother said she’d care for her when she’s released from the hospital, but that’s only a short-term solution.”

“When your mother is well enough to leave the hospital, she’ll be well enough to manage her own affairs.”

Night after night Sarah sobbed herself to sleep in Bob’s arms. She grieved for her father, for her mother, and for herself. Now, former friends crossed the street rather than speak to her. She felt diminished and stripped of respectability. Her nightmares were

filled with flashing red lights and her mother's chair-shaped figure being carted off to the hospital.

After two and a half months of hospitalization, Elizabeth was as well as she would ever be. She refused to go to Etta's and demanded to be taken to her own home. When she saw the packed boxes she exploded, "How could you pack up all my things without asking me? How dare you. Why don't you think?"

Sarah apologized and kept her thoughts to herself as she helped her mother unpack boxes. "The doctor said you might be ill for a year, Mom. I thought it best to pack up the house. I couldn't keep up two houses indefinitely. I'm really sorry."

The converted garage behind the DOG HOUSE was locked and boarded, and Sarah, Bob, and the twins moved in with Elizabeth at her request. Sarah gave her mother the envelopes stuffed with receipts and bills. The lawyer revoked Sarah's power-of-attorney, and the baby-sitter was dismissed. Any independence Sarah had gained in the three years she'd lived away from her mother was packed away along with her mother's denial.

Sarah, helping her mother line fresh paper on the bottom of her dresser drawers, cringed as Elizabeth shouted, "Turn out those damn lights. Electricity costs money!" Elizabeth had never shouted or cursed before; now she'd inherited Bart's language and temperament along with all his money. Financially secure for the rest of her life, Elizabeth had no one to provide emotional support. Sarah, no heiress, received no money in the will, but she did have Bob to defend her.

Elizabeth's shock treatment had dulled her memories of *that night*, but not her memory of Bart's personality. She imitated him in every way without ever mentioning his name. If Sarah said, "Remember when Daddy said . . .," Elizabeth would warn her not to mention Bart's name again. Elizabeth, the passive-submissive housewife, had turned into a businessperson overnight. She shouted into the phone, as Bart once had, "Time is money!" She demanded her orders be obeyed immediately. One by one, she sold Bart's taverns and haggled over the price until she received the amount, she felt her

due. Elizabeth's anger spilled over into the house, unrelieved by the humor Bart had once provided.

All of Sarah's adolescent tics returned: she shrugged her shoulders, twisted her neck from side to side, sniffled and blinked her eyes repeatedly. Sarah, forced to make adult decisions, was now forced to listen to Elizabeth speaking to her as if she were still a child.

CHAPTER 6

At dusk on September 15, 1952, Sarah lit the memorial candle. Although she couldn't decipher the Hebrew letters printed on white paper and glued around the glass, she knew the ritual. The lit candle was a yearly reminder of loss; one Jewish tradition that Sarah valued. The candle served as a twenty-four-hour reminder of death, and a commemoration for Bart.

When Sarah awoke at 8:00 the following morning, she rubbed sleep from her eyes and stared at the silver-starred wallpaper on the ceiling. As a teenager, she'd spent hours staring at the stars overhead while she daydreamed her future as a world renowned artist. She would visualize a large room with shelves that stored paints and brushes, and a row of chests that contained paper of every size and shape. Sarah hadn't held a paintbrush since the birth of the twins. Now Bob and Sarah shared her former twin-bedded room, and she missed the warmth and cuddling of their double bed in the "Poo House." The temporary move to Elizabeth's house had drifted into months and months.

Nostalgia played hide and seek as Sarah yearned for those three honeymoon years when she and Bob had slept together curled into each other like nesting spoons. She'd felt loved when Bob whispered "This is the best part of the day," as he cupped her left breast in his hand. She'd felt loved, hours later, when she awoke in her husband's arms.

René had a selective memory and so did Sarah. She remembered the love and laughter of those early years of marriage and ignored the hours she'd spent sewing in silence while the twins slept. Bob brooked no interruptions when he poured over his text books only a few feet away from her chair. When Bob requested another cup of coffee, Sarah jumped

to her feet to serve him without uttering a word. She knew she'd break his concentration if she spoke; Bob had reminded her of that often enough.

Sarah chose to forget the soot and cold drafts that blew through the cracks in the uninsulated walls of the reconverted garage. Now she could laugh when she remembered the pole that fell periodically and dumped all their clothing on the floor of the makeshift closet. Sarah had despised the "Poo House" when she'd lived there. Now she smiled remembering her laughing complaint to Bob: "I hate and despise bugs and insects! Every morning I sweep the kitchen floor and the whole pile crawls away."

Sarah frowned when she thought of the mice that roamed the three-room garage apartment. One week she'd counted thirteen. "The cereal boxes are filled with more than cereal," she'd informed Bob. "That's where the mice leave their calling cards." At least in the "Poo House" Sarah had been mistress of her own kitchen. In Elizabeth's kitchen, *Elizabeth* was BOSS.

"SAR-AH! How many times do I have to tell you? That's not the way to wring a dishcloth!" Elizabeth grabbed the dishrag from Sarah's wet hand and scolded, "I'll show you one more time the correct way to do it," she said, as she wrung the rag *away* from her rather than *toward* her.

In Elizabeth's house, she called the tune and it had a jarring note. Sarah, once more at her mother's beck and call, found no escape from her mother's carping. Elizabeth berated her daughter's mothering and her housekeeping. She called Sarah lazy if she caught her sitting in a chair reading a book. "Sarah, you've been home from work for over an hour and the twins' toys are still littering the living room. I like a clean house, even if you don't."

Three months after Bart's death, Sarah had found an escape hatch, a retreat from her critical mother for seven hours a day. She'd found employment as a traffic manager in an advertising agency in Chicago's Loop. From nine to five, five days a week, there was no complaining mother to contend with, and at work no one knew how Bart had died.

Half of Sarah's modest salary went to Elizabeth's maid, who cared for the twins during the day. Elizabeth complained about the maid, certain that the woman spent more than half her time on the twins and less on her cleaning assignments. Every day Elizabeth complained to Sarah about the maid, and five days a week she complained to the maid about Sarah.

Wide awake now, Sarah sat up in bed, plumped her pillow, leaned into it, and watched her husband in the mirror above the dresser. Bob held his baby-blue and navy-blue diagonal striped tie in one hand, flipped the other end over and under, and wiggled the knot at his throat. Then he buttoned the small collar-buttons at his throat, smoothed down his tie and clasped the tie ends with a silver bar.

Sarah admired his strong back rippling his shirt as he adjusted his tie. She admired everything about him—his strong jaw; his crooked Gene Kelly grin, his straight blond hair, barbered to perfection. She enjoyed the ritual of watching Bob dress, just as she had enjoyed the ritual of watching Bart shave.

A teenage Sarah had laughed to herself over her father's "gross" taste; now she admired her husband's perfect taste and his muscular arms as his oxford-cloth shirt stretched across his brawny shoulders. Bob, still lanky, had the physique and smooth movements of the high school basketball star he'd once been.

Sarah's admiration and love for her husband covered the raw edges of a year's grieving for her father. Bob's love had softened the blow of Bart's murder. I've lost my father, she thought, but at least I have a good husband.

No racket was heard from the twins' room—yet. At least she'd have a chance to talk to Bob before he left for work.

Turning from the mirror, Bob smiled at his wife, and said, "Good morning, Honey," as she patted the edge of her twin bed and said, "Come sit with me for a minute."

"Shouldn't you be getting ready for work, Sarah?"

“It’s Saturday, Bob,” Sarah laughed. “I don’t go to the office on Saturday.”

“Lucky you,” Bob sighed. “I never seem to have a Saturday off. I haven’t much time. What’s up?”

“I want to talk to you.”

Bob sat on the edge of the bed, his legs aimed for the door, and said, “So talk. I’ll be late for my first appointment.”

“Bob, I’m sick of work. I’m sick of the long train ride from Hegwisch, and the drive to the station. I’m sick and tired of my mother’s complaints, and I’m just plain tired from working full-time and caring for the twins the minute I walk in the door. Do you know how many nights I’ve fallen asleep on the sofa, too tired to even undress for bed?”

“So quit. I make enough now to support us.”

“You don’t understand. Working with strangers for the last nine months has really helped. I rarely talk about Dad’s death anymore,” though she thought about it constantly.

“That’s good, Honey, but get to the point,” Bob said as he tied his shoelaces.

Sarah leaned toward Bob and held his hand. “I miss you,” she said. “When will we find time to be alone and talk? I miss the twins; even on Saturdays, I’m too busy with laundry and housework to play with them.”

“Sarah you don’t have to make excuses,” Bob said, drawing her into his arms. “You know I never wanted you to go back to work in the first place. Quit, and let me get to work before I’m fired and you won’t be able to quit.”

“That’s not funny,” Sarah said, as she pulled away. “You still don’t understand. I want to quit work, yes, but that’s not it.” She took a breath and then, with emphasis, said, “You’re a lawyer now. I want you to open your own law office. I want us to buy a house. I’ve saved over a thousand dollars since I started to work and I . . .”

“You’ve what?” Bob exploded as he jumped to his feet. “You have all that money and you didn’t tell me! I could have used your help. You know how broke we were when we moved in with your mother.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you sure as hell have. Honest to God, Sarah, sometimes I think you don’t know your ass from left-center-field.”

“Honey, don’t be mad. Please don’t be angry. I can explain if you’ll give me a chance. You know I worked at Goldblatt’s while I was in high school, and I have a thousand dollars saved in war bonds. We’ve got five hundred dollars left from the thousand my father gave us for a wedding present, Aunt Mae will lend us two thousand and. . . .”

“Aunt Mae!” Bob was outraged and snarled, “How could you borrow money from your aunt without even discussing it with me?”

Sarah knelt across the bed and clasped Bob’s arm. “Please, Bob. Please, Honey, listen. I didn’t ask Aunt Mae. She volunteered. She asked me why I was unhappy, and I finally confessed that Mom was driving me nuts. So she volunteered the money. Aunt Mae is grieving for her brother and wants to help his daughter. I told her I’d have to discuss the matter with you, and if you agreed you’d draw up a contract and . . . Bob, please . . . with what I’ve saved, and the loan, we would have enough for a down payment on a house. You could open your law practice. How many times have you shared that dream with me? Bob, I have to get out of this house before I fall apart completely. Mom’s stronger now. I’ve done my duty. I can’t live with her anymore. She screams at me like I’m a kid. The twins obey her, not me. Please Bob, please.”

Three months later, Bob, Sarah, and the twins moved from Calumet City to the village of Vanderville, only five miles away but worlds apart in character. Tavern keepers dominated Cal City, while farmer’s abounded in Vanderville.

It was 1953 and the community was celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the day Herman Vanderville, an immigrant Dutch farmer, settled on the flat Illinois prairie. Half the community participated in the festivities. Dressed in period costumes, farmers and newcomers looked alike as they danced in the street to celebrate old Herman's accomplishment. Sarah, decked out in a long skirt, and Bob in a high hat, danced among Herman's descendants and felt as if they were members of the community.

In 1953, housing developments were replacing the Vanderville onion fields, but Herman's descendants still dominated local politics. They owned the majority of bank stock and more of the five-room, brick ranch houses in the new Rancho Vista subdivision than the Shallot's did. Bob and Sarah, like thousands of other ex-GI families, had mortgaged their future and moved into one of those look-alike housing developments that had changed Illinois villages into Chicago suburbs.

Vanderville's "old-timers" so resented the intruders, whose housing changed the landscape, that they wrote letters of complaint to the weekly newspaper. Sarah read the *Vanderville Journal* from cover to cover every week. She even landed a weekly column after introducing herself to the editor. For five cents a word she wrote about new homeowners and new babies born in the subdivision.

Others might complain of the monotony, but Sarah rejoiced in a house and a kitchen of her own. Her kitchen looked like every other kitchen in the gray, muddy sameness of cracker-box houses, but Sarah reveled in her very own new stove and refrigerator. She cooked three meals a day for her growing family, experimented with new recipes and twelve-egg chiffon cakes in every flavor, and on Sundays cooked for Bob's large family, and for Elizabeth.

Every Sunday, after Mass, Bob's parents, his four sisters, two brothers-in-law, and assorted nieces and nephews arrived at the door to spend the day. The toddlers ran in and out of the

screen doors, baby bottles warmed on the stove, the men painted the fence or the garage, and the women clattered about the kitchen, serving up a hot meal on a makeshift table set up in the living room.

Elizabeth arrived promptly at 5:00 P.M., just before dinner. She'd carry the butter dish with a half-pound of butter to the table and complain about the weight, the heat, and the noise. Then every Monday morning she'd call in her objection to the seating arrangement: "Why do you always seat me next to your mother-in-law? That woman is brainless." Sarah always arranged to have her mother and mother-in-law sit at the far end of the table. She couldn't bear Elizabeth's constant complaints and criticism, and she'd had enough of listening to Bob's mother give her housekeeping tips. "Now Sarah, the next time you make soup, boil your eggs in the same water and you'll save gas," and "I notice you never clip coupons. I go from store to store every week and save a few pennies here and there, but it all adds up." It adds up all right, Sarah thought, as she listened with less and less patience each week. The pennies Agnes saved on groceries were spent on gas for the car. But then, she wouldn't think of that, her husband did all the driving because Agnes refused to learn. John, Sarah's long-suffering father-in-law, surrounded by women and with only one son, treated Sarah like another daughter and she basked in his attention as she once had with Bart.

The fathers in the subdivision mowed lawns on Saturday or Sunday, and the women bandaged scraped knees and wiped runny noses. Some men drank beer and watched TV after dinner, while Bob returned to his new law office on Main Street. Bob, one of the few lawyers in the village, burned the midnight oil Monday through Friday.

Throughout the week, some women in the subdivision coffee-klatsched and gossiped in the afternoon with their neighbors, in the evening they watched TV with their husbands. Sarah studied sociology and psychology after she'd tucked the twins in bed and while she waited for Bob to return from the office.

Sarah had re-entered college when the twins were three, a year after they'd moved to Vanderville. In talking to Elizabeth, she announced proudly, "Mom, I'll be taking one or two courses a semester. It will take longer, but eventually I'll get my degree. I'll only go part-time, since babysitters are so expensive."

"How are the twins?" Elizabeth responded. Though she had encouraged Sarah's education before marriage, now she took a dim view. "Why are you going to college?" Without waiting for a reply she added, "You're a wife and a mother. Isn't that enough? You should do all the things your husband likes. You should help his career."

Elizabeth and her brothers and sisters were raised with that old Victorian imperative and Sarah's aunts and uncles also questioned her motives for attending college. "You're married to a lawyer. You'll never have to work again. So why do you need an education?"

Bob encouraged Sarah's decision to return to college, as long as he didn't have to observe her doing homework. Late in the evening when he returned home from the office, he demanded that Sarah close her textbook, and chided her if she objected.

"But I'm studying for a test."

"Never mind that," Bob would laugh. "Fix me something to eat. Besides, whatever you learn goes in one ear and out the other. Stop pouting. I'm the one earning a living around here. Besides," Bob chuckled, "if I let you study too much, you might outgrow me."

Reluctantly, Sarah closed her textbook and laid it aside. "Don't tease me. A year of finishing school before we were married turned me into a lady; I just want to be an educated one."

"That's good, Honey. A lawyer needs a beautiful, bright lady to hang on his arm." Bob grinned and kissed Sarah's cheek. "Seriously, I think college is good for you. Studying keeps your mind occupied. Besides, when you keep busy you don't bitch about my long hours at the office. Now fix me a sandwich."

Sarah slapped ham on a buttered slice of bread. She loved books and ideas, but most of all she wanted to keep up with him. Sarah didn't want Bob to leave her behind.

Sarah kept busy keeping time to Bob's, El's, and the twins' demands for attention. She had inherited Bart's high energy, and found time in the evening to study no matter how busy her days were.

After several years of self-discipline, the monotony of housekeeping, child-care, and study became boring, and Sarah finally announced to Bob, "You have to stay home one night a week so I can get out of the house. The twins are your kids, too, remember. One night to myself is not too much to ask."

"Okay. Okay. Don't get hysterical. I could use a night at home. Just have the twins in bed before you leave. What *are* you going to do with your big night out?"

"I'm joining the St. Agnes Ladies Club. I need new friends. Natalie and Mona are away at school studying for their master's degrees. I leave school as soon as my class ends, so I haven't made any friends there. I need women friends, and the neighbors don't count. When I talk to them for five minutes I'm bored to death. I have a low boring-point." Sarah chuckled. "All the neighbors talk about is diapers and baby food. Alice got excited just telling me about the life insurance policy her husband took out. Besides, Bob, the more people I meet in Vanderville, the more people I can steer your way."

Sarah joined St. Agnes Ladies Club, honed the same "friendly tactics" she'd used in high school, and was elected vice-president after attending three meetings. After the election, the church pastor informed her, "You're the first Jewish-Catholic convert so honored." As they stood in the vestibule after Mass, an usher handed the collection basket to the priest and Father Damon reached inside and presented Josh and Johnny each with a shiny new half-dollar. The twins, looking surprised and delighted, politely said "Thank you, Father." Sarah looked perplexed.

At home she complained to Bob who had skipped services because of a cold. “How could Father Damon take money out of the collection basket and give it to the boys? And how could he make cracks about Negroes? After his sermon, he stayed at the pulpit, chuckled and announced, ‘I want all of you to support the Volunteer Fire Department. It keeps the niggers out of Vanderville.’

“What exactly does that mean, Bob?”

“It means the fire department, because it’s volunteer, wouldn’t have to trouble themselves if a negro house was on fire.”

“That stinks! And so does Father Damon . . . the bigot. I hate the word nigger. That poor excuse for a priest can’t butter me up by giving my kids money.”

“His bigotry disgusts me, too, but I’m sure he gave the boys money because you’re the wife of a soon-to-be prominent attorney who’ll be rich enough to build you a big house with a studio behind the garage for your art work.” Grinning, Bob added, “And don’t forget . . . after I’m famous for my political savvy, I’ll be appointed to the Supreme Court.” Winking at Sarah, Bob laughed and asked, “Can I butter you up, Honey?” Kissing Sarah’s neck he aimed her toward the bedroom.

“Bob, don’t. . . the twins . . .”

“Never mind the twins.”

Sarah smiled her way across Vanderville as her enthusiastic “Hi Augie, Hi Herm” encouraged her former high school classmates, now young businessmen, to Bob for lawyering. “Hi Tom. You’ve met my husband. Have you seen his new office across from Herm’s feed store?” Sarah had a new mission in life—helping her husband succeed.

Now that Bob had his own law practice, Sarah’s friends no longer avoided her, and she found that being the wife of an up-and-coming young attorney revived the respectability that had been buried with her father. No one mentioned Bart’s murder—at

least not to Sarah. The memories remained well-kept secrets as she played the role of housewife and mother. With the passing of time, she began to feel safe, confident that the scandal had been forgotten. She felt secure, that is, until the day six-year-old Josh asked, “Was grandpa a criminal? The kids at school said he was.”

For a split second, Sarah stood motionless, her throat dry. Composing herself, she spoke in a calm and soothing tone. “No, Josh, your grandpa was not a criminal. He was a good man who loved all of us very much. The newspapers wrote lies about his death, and some people believed them. If anyone else on the playground says nasty things to you or your brother, be sure and tell me and I’ll call their mothers.” Sarah hugged her son and said, “You have nothing to be ashamed of, Josh. I should have talked to you and Johnny about grandpa long before this. I’m sorry I wasn’t the first to tell you. Don’t pay any attention to the kids at school. If you want to know anything about your grandfather, you come talk to me, okay? And don’t mention this to Johnny until I have a chance to talk to him.”

Josh and Johnny felt no shame. Their mother convinced them that their grandfather was not a criminal, and Mom never lied. Sarah felt enough shame for all of them.

With the twins in school, Sarah had more hours to volunteer for civic affairs. Continuing with her studies, she typed her term papers as she had once typed Bob’s. The house was kept spotless with the help of a once-a-week teenager who came by to assist with the chores. Husband and children were well fed and well loved.

Every summer Sarah hired a teenager to watch the twins for two weeks while she worked in Bob’s office replacing his vacationing secretary. One week each summer, Bob, Sarah, and the twins camped in Michigan or Wisconsin; and much to the surprise of Bob’s sisters, Sarah enjoyed camping. “It’s great,” she’d report on their return. “Bob gets things started in the morning—lights the fire, fixes breakfast—and doesn’t wake me until it’s ready. Boy is that a nice change.”

Sarah reveled in change. To celebrate her tenth wedding anniversary and to avoid the dread of turning thirty, she had her auburn hair bleached to high platinum. The new “non-color” flattered her fair complexion and she hoped Bob would be pleased with her appearance. He wasn’t. However, he did come around to Sarah’s point of view after several of his associates commented on the “beautiful blond.”

To compliment her “new look,” Sarah designed high-style clothing and the local seamstress crafted the pure wool Sarah purchased at Marshall Field’s. The new jacketed dresses looked handmade not homemade when Sarah accompanied Bob to political meetings. Now that Bob was a budding politician, he wanted Sarah dressed appropriately as a candidate’s wife. She hid her concerns under perfectly applied makeup and her “perfect” 34-24-34 figure. With the aid of “falsies,” she presented that phony front to the public.

Elizabeth informed Sarah repeatedly, “It’s a wife’s responsibility to make her marriage work,” and Sarah obeyed her mother’s rules as well as society’s. The “oldest” woman in her political science class, Sarah received an A and applied her newly acquired knowledge to Bob’s latest interest—his political career. The only rule Sarah seemed comfortable with ignoring was: “A woman’s place is in the home.”

Sarah, a convert to Catholicism when she was twenty-three, embraced the rigid Catholic code: Mass every Sunday, no meat on Friday, and children must be educated in parochial school.

The nine-year-old twins were honor students at St. Agnes’ and the Catholic rules-of-conduct were Sarah’s made-to-order security blanket. A regular attendant at First Friday Mass, she believed that her faithful attendance would guarantee a priest by her side to administer Last Rites when she died. She crossed herself before her evening prayers and again each morning as she recited “Everything this day for Jesus.” There were, however, limits to her dedication. She ignored the rosary, finding it both repetitious and boring. She prayed to God rather than Jesus,

Mary or the Saints. She wondered why Christians worshipped a Jew and hated the Jewish race. Nevertheless, she felt safe behind her Gentile mask and felt at long last that she belonged.

Sarah's spirituality was a conglomeration of Jewish and Gentile rituals. Each year she lit the Jewish memorial candle for her father, and when the "official candles" Elizabeth had given her ran out, she replaced her supply with grocery store red Christmas candles. To commemorate the eighth anniversary of Bart's death, Sarah lit the candle at dusk. She stared at the flickering flame and prayed for her father's soul. "I miss you, Daddy," she whispered. "I haven't had a real belly-laugh since you died."

Sarah felt guilty when she remembered her father saying, "If I give you permission to marry Bob, you must promise me you will *never* become a Catholic." Sarah didn't convert until a year after Bart's death, when a priest convinced her: "Sarah, your own spirituality is at stake. No one, not even your father, had the right to extort such a promise from you."

Hours later, the candle flame sputtered at the bottom of its glass container. The vigil ended, but not for Sarah. In her head she talked to Bart as if he were seated next to her. "You'd be as proud of Bob as I am. All his hard work has paid off. Six months ago he was elected Police-Magistrate the first candidate to ever beat the old timers. Three months ago we moved into our own custom built house."

Judge Shallot had reached his goal of prominence and increased his earnings as an established lawyer in a village that had grown to twelve thousand. Bob had an unblemished reputation as a reformer: pure of heart and purpose, or so Sarah thought. Bob bragged to Sarah about his millionaire clients—the doctors and lawyers who came to him for legal counsel—just as Bart had bragged to El about the doctors and lawyers who were his customers at the DOG HOUSE. There the similarity ended. El scorned Bart's work, while Sarah basked in Bob's accomplishments. What Bob wanted, Sarah wanted.

Denying her own needs to further Bob's began to take its toll. Sarah made a doctor's appointment to find out why she was so fatigued. Sarah lit the tenth memorial candle for her father and wondered what had sustained him through the action-packed years of his life.

Bob and Sarah were comers, a fact acknowledged in the *Vanderville Journal* and the *Hammond Times* with frequent mention of the Shallots's activities. "Judge and Mrs. Shallot held a tea in their home for Governor Otto Kerner. The governor hopped on a bike he found next to the house and pedaled down the street, much to the delight of the Shallots and their guests...."

"Judge and Mrs. Shallot held a reception for Eunice Shriver, the sister of candidate Kennedy, in their beautifully appointed home on Van Dyke Drive." In 1960, a smiling picture of Sarah and Eunice graced the front page. That same year, the newspapers reported: "Judge and Mrs. Shallot attended President Kennedy's inaugural ball in Washington, D.C. The Shallots were the first to shake hands with President Kennedy when he entered the ballroom of Washington's Mayflower Hotel."

Sarah giggled as she read "first to shake hands." She knew the reporters were exaggerating again—this time in her favor. True, she'd questioned several uniformed guards and deduced where the president would enter the ballroom. She'd stood alone near heavy draperies while others clustered at the main entrance. When the president and his entourage of security men entered through the French doors, which were hidden behind the draperies, they breezed past Sarah, but she rushed after them. Watching Kennedy climb two steps to the platform, she stretched out her arm above her head to shake his hand. The Marine Band played "Hail to the Chief" while Sarah's fingers tingled in response to Jack Kennedy's firm handshake.

Sarah's excitement and enthusiasm lasted until she stepped through her own front door and discovered her mother waiting in the living room. Before she could open her mouth to express

her joy, Elizabeth started in. “What kind of mother leaves her children? Johnny and Josh got colds while you were gone. The maid called me, and I’ve been here all day doing your job, nursing your children.”

Sarah, unable to get a word in and exhausted from three days of hectic activity and the flight home, retreated to her bedroom. Through the closed door she could hear her mother’s raised voice as Elizabeth continued her tirade. Sarah also heard Bob’s raised voice. “Elizabeth, I want you to leave. Right now.” Bob, who had always treated his mother-in-law with patience and respect, had been pushed too far.

Elizabeth left the house in a huff and the twins knocked on their mother’s bedroom door. Throwing themselves across her bed, they hugged and kissed her while asking questions about the inaugural festivities. Sarah responded with artificial excitement.

The eleven-year-old twins were well enough to return to school in the morning, and after they left the house Sarah lay on the living room sofa. Attending the inaugural was the most exhilarating experience of Sarah’s life, next to her wedding day, and Elizabeth’s behavior had stained both of them. Would anything exciting ever happen again?

Weeks later Sarah’s enthusiasm returned when she read what a columnist wrote about her in the *Hammond Times*. “Sarah Shallot...wife, mother, avid reader of good literature, model, student at an area college, award-winning artist—best-of-show at the Hammond Art Museum’s annual for the second year in a row—campaign manager for her husband’s re-election as Police Magistrate, good neighbor, camper, and cook par excellence. Too bad her new program isn’t on TV rather than radio. A Mrs. America promoter would welcome Sarah Shallot’s participation.”

As a bride, Sarah *had* sent away for a Mrs. America application, but she’d changed her mind about entering the contest when she’d read: “Has there been any event in your life which you would not wish to share with the public?” Even before Bart’s murder, she couldn’t bring herself to admit that her father was a tavern keeper. Every year she would

wince at the school questionnaire when she filled out the line stating “father’s occupation.”

No matter what a *Times* columnist wrote, Sarah didn’t feel special. Her father-in-law had congratulated her saying, “That article will help Bob’s law practice.” She never showed the article to her mother. Elizabeth would respond with the same old refrain: “You’re doing too much, Sarah. You’ll get sick.”

Sarah’s “big house” on Van Dyke Drive required more than a twice-weekly maid to maintain it. Jessie did the ironing, but Sarah, ever-conscientious, oversaw the neatly ironed tablecloths stacked by size and color in the linen closet. She saw to her well-stocked pantry and bronze-colored refrigerator. Sarah, always prepared for any emergency, never ran out of bread, milk, or toilet paper. She still lived by her mother’s words, “A place for everything, and everything in its place. If you pick up your newspapers at night, you’ll awake to a clean living room.” Elizabeth, once the epitome of an organized homemaker, no longer picked up her newspapers. In fact, she lived in a cluttered one-bedroom apartment in the city. Her desk and tables were littered with bills, flyers, and miscellaneous mail. She never practiced what she preached.

Elizabeth had sold more than half of her Louis XV Chippendale furniture after selling her house in Calumet City the second year after Bart’s death. She had moved three times since then, and now her small apartment held her two cushioned love seats, a console table, vase stands, and her Chippendale writing table with the desk top that was too small and ornate to hold a typewriter. Her gold dinner service for twelve sat boxed in her locker in the basement.

Elizabeth had eliminated furnishings while Bob and Sarah accumulated decorative pieces for their eight-room house. No scrolling or embellishment on the Shallots’ walnut dining room table, or their matching walnut bedroom set. “I’m nothing like my mother,” Sarah bragged to Bob, as she patted her blonde hair. “I want our home to be lived in, not just looked at and admired.”

“What do you mean you’re not like your mother?” Bob replied. “You look more like her every day. The only difference is that your lips turn up at the corners while hers turn down.”

“Bob, I do not look like my mother,” Sarah said aloud, while under her breath she muttered, “I don’t have a chignon; I smoke and she doesn’t anymore.” Sarah, like her mother before her, wouldn’t miss her weekly appointment at the beauty shop.

Sarah, mistress of her “dream home,” looked the part. She labeled herself “Lady-of-the- Manor” as she dabbed Chanel #5 behind her ears and planned intimate gatherings, dinner parties, or a small Christmas open-house for a hundred or so.

Bob, the bread winner, wanted French bread, not whole wheat. “After all,” he reminded Sarah, “I bring home the bacon, the least you can do is fry it the way I like it.”

Bob worked long hours to pay the ever-mounting grocery bills, while Sarah worked equally long hours grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning up the dishes. She decided Bob was a gourmand, not a gourmet. They no longer shared the same tastes, in food or entertainment. She wanted to attend the ballet, and he attended another Cub’s home game. She wanted to hear classical music on the car radio, and Bob kept the station tuned to, “Bruno’s on first . . . second . . . it’s a homerun. . . .” The car radio sounded to Sarah like static babble. She and Bob no longer campaigned together. Now their paths left separate trails.

“There has to be more to life than rich food and dinner parties,” Sarah moaned to Bob when she finally caught up with him. “I’m tired of this meaningless entertaining. I’m tired of registering for college year after year. I’ve been in college for fourteen years and I’m still only a junior.”

“Sarah, what the hell is wrong with you? We have everything going for us: a perfect marriage and a beautiful home filled with expensive furniture. You have your own car. What more do you want? Why aren’t you ever satisfied? You’re getting more like your mother every day.”

Sarah ignored the “mother button” Bob pushed, and said, “You don’t understand, something important is missing from my life, and I don’t know what it is.”

“What do you mean, I don’t understand! We’ve made it . . . Is that enough for you? Don’t you think I get sick of the same routine—shit, shower, and shave every day? Don’t you think I’m sick of getting up every morning on the run and wearing myself to a frazzle day and night?”

Sarah flinched at the threatening sound of Bob’s raised voice. Shower, Bob hardly showered at all any more. She hated watching him wash his feet in the sink when they had two showers and two bathtubs.

Bob’s shouts cut into Sarah’s thoughts, “Damn it, Sarah, I’m the one who paid to have your studio built behind the garage. Why can’t you keep busy out there?”

Busy! “Bob, my days are nightmares.”

“I’m fed up with your whining and complaining. I’m busting my ass for you and the kids. What more do you want?” Bart’s words. Sarah thought her father had entered the room.

Bob too, wanted to make up after the argument. He escorted Sarah to Bonwit Tellers’ and gave her a full half-day and all his attention. Sarah showed her style in a Bill Blass sleeveless silk dress and matching turquoise wool coat. She grinned in delight as she spun before Bob. When he nodded yes, she kissed him on the cheek and the saleslady smiled.

Sarah watched the fly cross and uncross its front legs like a child demonstrating, “shame, shame on you” with his fingers. She mumbled “ah huh, ah huh” periodically into the telephone, quietly laid the receiver on the kitchen counter, and ran to turn down the flame under the soup-pot on the stove. Rushing back to the phone, she mumbled “ah huh, yes” once more.

Elizabeth droned on, while Sarah held the receiver away from her ear. “On the way to Uncle Josh’s I stopped at the Jewel. I bought bread and milk. I made myself a nice pot of chicken soup. What are you having for dinner?”

“Chicken soup.”

“Sarah you should send a card to Aunt Esther. You forgot her birthday last year. Sarah, are you listening to me?”

“Ah huh,” Sarah responded. She never asked for her mother’s damn advice; why did she have to keep listening to it?

The same fly rubbed its front threads together; Sarah inspected the insect with no desire to smack it. She understood its vulnerability all too well.

Sarah held the phone away from her ear yet she could still hear Elizabeth’s complaints about some real or imaginary slight from her latest best friend. Periodically she mumbled “yes, ah huh,” and then held the phone away from her ear again. Finally she could stand it no longer: “Mom, I’ve got to go now, the soup’s boiling over.”

“You never have time for me. You always have something to do when I call. Why don’t you . . .”

“Mom, I’m hanging up now before all the soup’s on the stove. Bye.”

Sarah dropped matzo-balls into the boiling chicken soup. *Mom says she hates chit-chat.* The woman called her five times a day to ask the same questions: “How are you? How’s Bob? How are the twins?” She never waited for a reply.

Sarah wished she had the guts to slam the phone down without explanation or just once scream, “*Damn it!* Shut-up and leave me alone.” But she didn’t dare. Elizabeth might have another nervous breakdown. Then Sarah would have to take care of her, her cluttered apartment, and her mortgage business—again. Elizabeth had had three nervous breakdowns since Bart’s death. Sarah feared she was drifting into her first. The thought of a nervous breakdown had been on Sarah’s mind since Aunt Esther took her aside when she was nineteen: “You don’t have to worry about having a nervous breakdown like your mother; it isn’t hereditary. Sarah had worried ever since.

One day, after El's fifth phone call of the day, Sarah ranted and raved to Johnny about the frequent calls. He'd looked up at her with compassion and said, "If you talked to me the way Grandma talks to you . . . But you would never talk to me that way. But if you did, I'd tell you I didn't like it and you'd stop."

Sarah could tell her mother to stop until she was blue in the face, but nothing and no one ever stopped El's monologues. That woman was born with a gramophone in her mouth. Every call from her was the same old script of "I, I, I," never a conversation. Once, just once, Sarah longed to hear her mother say, "I'm proud of you." That would be the day.

Crushing out her cigarette with more energy than necessary, Sarah knew that she wanted more out of life than five calls a day from a complaining woman and an irritable husband who didn't care about his wife's concerns. Sarah didn't know what the more was, but she knew she wanted it.

CHAPTER 7

Bob lay on the living-room sofa, one arm dangling over the side as he fingered the shag rug. “What a day!” he moaned.

Sarah, curled in a living-room chair across from him, said, “I’m sorry you had a rough day,” then added, “I’ve had a tough day, too, but I’ve made a decision. Martin Luther King’s planning a march in Selma, Alabama, and I’m going to organize a sympathy march right here in Vanderville.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Sarah thought for a moment, twisted a lock of her hair with her finger, and continued. “Three members of my book club called today. Each woman said, ‘We’ve got to go to Selma.’ Each time I replied, ‘We’re not clergymen, or congressmen, or men for that matter. We live in an all white community. We have problems right here.’ The last time I heard myself say that I thought. . . .”

“Sarah, calm down,” Bob urged. “Slow down for Christ’s sake. You’re not making sense.”

Sarah unwound from the overstuffed chair, crossed the room, sat on the carpet next to the couch, and took Bob’s hand. She took a deep breath and said, “My mother is always telling me to ‘calm down,’ but I don’t feel calm. This is 1965, one hundred years after the Civil War, and blacks in the South still can’t vote. I want to do something about it. You did. In law school you refused to join the law fraternity because your black friend, Delwin, was refused membership. “Remember when you were best man at his wedding? Remember those law school picnics? We’d sit on a blanket with Del and his wife—what was her name?—and none of your white classmates would come near us.”

“Felicity. What’s the point?”

“The point is I’ve always wondered if I’d been a Gentile in Germany when Hitler came to power, if I’d have helped the Jews. I want to organize a sympathy march right for Martin Luther King. I could call a hundred people, and they could each call five or ten. I want to stand up and be counted. I . . .”

Bob pulled himself upright on the sofa and said, “Sarah, you’re just being emotional.”

Sarah dropped Bob’s hand, stood, and said with conviction, “Nothing gets accomplished unless someone cares.”

“You’re really serious, aren’t you?”

“You bet I am.”

“Sarah, think this through before you do anything. If you lead a march, I could lose my law practice. There are northern bigots, too.”

“So what if you lose your practice. You’re always bitching that you hate Vanderville, that you’d love to move away. If no one wants you to lawyer for them, you can always get a job with a firm in Chicago. Or we could live in Spain—you could write, I could paint. I . . .”

“Okay, okay. You’ve made your point. I don’t think you realize the possible repercussions, but if you’re determined, I’ll stand by you. Start making your phone calls.”

The following day Sarah made fifty phone calls. Each woman she spoke to said, “You’re absolutely right, Sarah. You can count on me.”

Before twenty-four hours had passed, the Shallots were targets. Unordered pizzas arrived at the front door, one at 2:00 A.M. The twins, after being threatened at school, came home bragging, “We stood up for you, Mom, and we used King’s nonviolence. No matter what the kids said, we didn’t throw a punch. We promised you we wouldn’t. We were called ‘nigger lovers’ but we don’t care. We’re proud of you, Mom.” Sarah hugged and kissed her teenage sons and said, “Thanks, guys. I’m proud of you, too.”

Two nights before the march, Bob answered the phone at 3:00 A.M. On the other end a caller threatened, “Are your children at home? You’d better check your car before you get into it in the morning.” For the rest of the night Bob and Sarah clung to each other in quiet determination.

The day before the march, the Vanderville police chief called and asked to come to the house. He arrived in the evening and after a polite cup of coffee, Chief Henry Van Sycle laid it out. “You know folks, there might be violence tomorrow. I want you both to be prepared. We’ve received a lot of phone calls and. . . .”

“Henry,” Sarah smiled, “if there is violence, and if you have to jail me, I don’t want to be integrated with anyone from Vanderville. I want a cell of my own.” The chief chuckled at Sarah’s comment, while Bob looked on with a stern face.

Standing to leave, the police chief said, “I wish you both well, but to tell you the truth, I’m the only one on the force who agrees with what you’re doing. We’ll do our best.”

After the chief left, Bob and Sarah stood behind the closed door and hugged for a long time. Then they walked quietly to their bedroom and sat on the bed holding hands.

“I never dreamed there was so much hate and bigotry,” Sarah whispered.

“You’re very naïve, Sarah,” Bob whispered back. “You’re an innocent and an idealist. Your parents protected you, and so have I. You think everyone’s your friend just because they tell you they are. You have no idea of how tough it is in the real world.”

Sighing, Sarah wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand and choked out “You’re right. I was naïve. All those people I called offered their support. They each made ten calls all right. Ten calls to warn their bigoted friends about the march. Even if they agreed with me—and not many of them did—they have reasons of their own to avoid being involved. My friend Claire called today and said, ‘I want to help, honest I do, but my husband won’t let me. He’s afraid he’ll lose his job.’

“What have I done? I’m afraid for you, Bob. I’m afraid for the twins. What will happen to them at school tomorrow? If someone tried to hurt me, I could cope with their

abuse, but if anyone lays a glove on you or the kids tomorrow, I swear I'll fight like a mad woman. I don't understand how the blacks have such strength. They see their loved ones attacked by police dogs and fire hoses and they don't fight back. I've got an inch worth of understanding now of what it feels like to be black."

Fresh snow, from the night before, covered the sidewalk as six people shivered against the chill to hold a banner over their heads that read: "We Support Martin Luther King." Bob, Sarah, Father Mike, the young parish priest, and three Calumet City friends turned their collars up to protect their necks.

Across the street from the marchers fifty of the local high school students, who had been released early for the spectacle, formed part of the rabid counter demonstration. They chanted their school motto, "Rebels, first, rah, rah, rah. Rebels last, sis-boom-bah." They waved miniature Confederate flags and clutched rock-centered snowballs. The larger boys waved the snowballs over their heads, ready to throw them, and the crowd cheered and shouted obscenities: "Nigger lovers. . . Rich bastards. Don't you have anything else to do?" Fathers and mothers sprinkled in the rabble urged their children on: "You tell 'em, rotten bastards. If they don't like Vanderville, move the hell out."

Chief Van Sycle stood in the center of the street to detour traffic. He issued a stern warning. "You kids get back up on the curb, and don't make any trouble." Father Mike, standing next to Sarah, held his hand up in a peace symbol, then bent down to whisper in her ear. "There's no point in our marching. There are only six of us. If those kids start throwing rocks, our peaceful march will be destroyed and the papers will attack us for causing violence. We've made our point, let's go to your house, now."

Sarah passed Father Mike's words on to the other "marchers" and as a group they slowly walked back to their parked cars. Without once turning back, they missed seeing the disappointment on the "rednecks" faces.

Sarah served sandwiches with hot tea and coffee, while the survivors of the march lingered at the dining-room table congratulating one another on their courage. The phone

rang with each bite of food. Father Mike insisted each time, “Let me answer.” He listened attentively to the foul language and threats, after which he said calmly, “No, this is not Mr. Shallot. This is Father Michael Murphy.” As each vigilante phone call clicked to silence, Father Mike would laugh, and then regale the marchers with the latest voice he recognized. “I wonder if Jim will confess calling a priest a dirty name.”

No blacks moved to Vanderville, but after the march white citizens no longer felt free to say “nigger” in public. Now they referred to “those people” as blacks.

Once again, so-called friends crossed the street to avoid Sarah. Her next-door neighbors wouldn’t borrow a cup of sugar. This time Sarah felt no shame. “Maybe we didn’t accomplish much, Bob,” she said, “but at least I don’t have to talk to those bigots anymore.”

The newspapers had played down the “incident” of the Martin Luther King march in Vanderville, yet Sarah felt more pride in her participation than she had in any other accomplishment. She resigned her membership in two civic organizations and concentrated on projects in her studio. Her phone no longer rang off the hook and she learned to value solitude. Slowly she began to take herself and her art work seriously. Gone were the pleasing, colorful abstracts that sold. In their place stood three-dimensional assemblages inspired by thoughtful consideration of contemporary social problems. Sarah had Vietnam on her mind when she constructed a two-story box construction. On the top level toy soldiers battled, their booted feet bursting through the ceiling of the conventional living room below.

Cloistered in the studio, Sarah was in control: she honed ideas and shaped materials to suit her mood. If the construction didn’t work, she blamed no one; instead, she patiently reworked the piece. “Maybe no one buys these,” she commented to Bob, “but I know they’re museum quality. That’s what counts.” No one purchased Sarah’s serious art, and few understood it. After viewing one of her latest creations, Father Mike said, “I wish I could see what’s in your brain—see what makes you tick.”

Sarah repeated the remark to Bob, and added, "I don't know what makes me tick, either. But I know I'm changing. I used to think if I collected for every charity or pounded on every door asking people to vote, I could change the world. Now I know someone else will have to do the charity collections and chair the committees. I'm through with filling society's needs; I'm going to fill some needs of my own."

For the next two years Sarah divided what free time she had between her studies and her studio. She was surprised when a woman she barely knew called to invite her to a newly formed Human Relations Commission. "We immediately thought of you," the caller said. "After that march a few of us finally voiced our opinions. Please attend."

At the meeting, Sarah listened to two black teenagers imported from a city ghetto pander to the white female audience. "Yes Maam," one said, "my Daddy took me to a Cubs game and peoples called me 'nigger' while they cheered Willie Mays, who plays on the visiting team."

"How awful," the white women gasped, while the black witnesses grinned watermelon smiles that obscured the anger in their eyes. Sarah recognized that look.

Returning home, she announced to Bob, "Am I sorry I left home for that! If anyone calls and asks me to do anything, I'm saying no. I didn't learn anything new at *the* meeting. Those women never talked to a black person before tonight. I knew how angry those young men were. I . . ."

"How did you know?"

"Remember, I told you my father. . . ."

Six-year-old Sarah and her father sat side by side on high stools. Bart grinned at the shoeshine boy at his feet and said, "Ben, give me my regular and give my daughter the best shoeshine she's ever had."

"Yessuh, Mista Mindel." The shoeshine boy's smile spread wide, anticipating his usual big tip.

The “boy” dabbed a mottled rag into the brown polish and applied it to both shoes. He lifted the soft-bristled brushes like an artist, his wrists holding steady as the brush danced across Sarah’s oxfords. His polishing rag, a flip-flopping S as he slapped each shoe until it gleamed.

“Look at dat, Missy Sarah. Ya can sees ya face. I’s the bestus shoeshine boy this side of Dixie. Missy, ya sure is gettin bigga. I has ta use twicen much polis on ya shoes,” Ben said, and laughed.

Sarah grinned back at Ben as he snapped the rag smartly against her shoe tips. She liked the sparkle in his eyes, the lilt of his voice, his rag making music against the leather of Bart’s shoes. “How long have you been polishing shoes, Ben?” Bart asked.

“Fifty years, Mista Mindel. Fifty years.” Ben’s wide smile was aimed at his prize customer.

Bart stepped down from his high stool and held out his hand to Sarah, then reached into his trouser pocket, handed Ben four bits, and said, “You’re a good boy, Ben. See you next week.”

Ben grinned, rolled the coins in his hand, and said, “Thanksya suh. Thanksya very much.” Ben’s grin faded as soon as Bart turned his back.

At thirty-eight Sarah’s smile had faded, too. She was not amused as she cleared the dining room table at 10:00 P.M. and scraped the remains of her homemade apple pie into the garbage. Moments before, she and Bob had said goodnight to Bob’s parents at the front door. When the door closed, Bob announced, “I’m going up to read the papers in bed. Don’t take too long down here.”

Sarah stacked the plates, cups, and saucers in the dishwasher. She filled the soap dispenser, turned the dial to on, and listened for the hum before she switched off the kitchen light. She never left a room without turning off the lights. She hated hearing Bob shout at the twins, “Turn off those damn lights. Electricity costs money.”

In the laundry room Sarah emptied the dryer and piled the jumble of dry clothes on top. She emptied the washer, jammed the wet clothes into the dryer, and kicked the door shut with her foot. She pushed the starter button but the machine remained silent. She kicked the dryer hard with her foot, and the motor turned over. “Kick her hard, lady,” the repair man had advised. “She’s on her last breath. If you kick her, she’ll last a while longer.”

Me, too, Sarah thought, as she picked up a batch of separated whites from the floor, threw them in the washer, and jammed the sheets to the bottom to make room for the pillow cases. She poured liquid detergent without measuring and closed the lid.

Searching through the heap of clean laundry on top of the dryer, she found the towels, folded them, sorted each by size, and stacked them on the chipped red enamel table she’d recently purchased on sale at Marshall Field’s. Something about the table seemed familiar.

While sorting Bob’s socks, she thought of something she’d read: “Any man who wears black and navy blue stockings deserves to sort them himself.” She continued mating the pairs while her mind raced along with her fingers. If she set the alarm an hour early, she could get to school and study before her psychology exam. She could have studied that night but her mother-in-law talked nonstop—about people Sarah didn’t know. If it wasn’t what she ate for lunch, then Agnes was asking to be driven to one of her miserable bingo games at the church. She was such a bore.

Sarah knew better than to say anything to Bob. One word about any of Bob’s relatives, and his reaction varied from irritability to outrage. No telling what he’d do if she told him she wanted time for herself and was sick to death of serving and entertaining his relatives. The mere suggestion that any of Bob’s kin might be less than perfect meant another jibe at Sarah. “We didn’t have miserable childhoods like yours.”

Sarah bent over and placed Bob’s socks at the bottom of the yellow laundry basket, muttering to herself, “Bob doesn’t know what a bore his mother is because he never listens to her. He sits at the table like the lord of the manor, ignores his mother

totally, and directs his eyes and his words to his father. He brags to John about his latest accomplishment, ‘Yeah, Dad, I beat the bejesus out of the opposition lawyer,’ he snickered, ‘and my client was driving drunk as a skunk.’“

Bob’s father hung on his son’s words as if he were receiving a directive from God. When God-Bob spoke to his father, no one could get a word in edgewise. Sarah knew more about politics than her father-in-law, but her opinion was never considered. Her role was to keep Agnes busy so the *men* could talk.

Sarah fumed as she placed the folded towels on top of Bob’s socks. Leaning her rear end against the vibrating dryer, the warmth and motion soothed Sarah’s tension for a moment and she chuckled remembering a smart crack Josh had made to one of his aunts.

“Josh,” Marlene had said, “why don’t you get your hair cut? You’re beginning to look like Jesus.”

“Why shouldn’t I? My father’s God!”

The dryer stopped abruptly. Sarah raised her foot and slammed it against the machine until it and her thoughts hummed once more. If she set the alarm for an hour and a half early, she could fix the twins French toast; they’d love that. It had been a long time since she fixed them a hot breakfast, and she was feeling guilty.

Sarah turned the washer dial to start, pulled the knob, and carried the full laundry basket into the adjoining recreation room. She was so tired, her toenails hurt.

At the foot of the stairs leading to the living room, dining room, and kitchen, Sarah switched on the light and headed up. Then, abruptly, she changed her mind, stepped down one step, and placed the laundry basket on the floor. She turned off the light and, with her hands in front of her, groped in the dark for a cushioned chair. She found the chair and collapsed into it with her head back, and her eyes closed. She was so tired. How would she even get through tomorrow? First a test in the morning, and then to the butcher shop to order boned chicken breasts.

Sarah felt like de-boned chicken, slavishly complying with Bob’s wishes. He wanted the boned chicken served to their guests on Saturday night, and come hell or high

water, that's what she'd serve. Bob acted as if royalty were coming for dinner; instead it was only a lawyer friend, Dan, and his miserable wife.

Sarah made a mental note to call Priscilla, her beautician, to change her Thursday standing appointment to Saturday. She knew Priss would give her a hard time, but Thursday was the only day her father-in-law could reupholster the dining room chairs. She smiled anticipating John's visit—when Bob wasn't around they had good conversations. John listened to her and offered fatherly advice when she asked for it. He treated her like one of his own daughters. She was the only one allowed to kiss him goodnight at the front door. He'd look pained, but Sarah knew by his eyes that he liked the attention.

Attention. What Sarah wouldn't have given for a little attention. Her sigh sounded as if it had originated in her very soul. Lately she'd begun sighing like her long-suffering father-in-law. It was John who set and cleared the table like she did. It was John who drove his wife to the supermarket, and it was John who emptied the grocery bags.

In the early years of Sarah's marriage, Bob had been helpful like his father. When Sarah was nine months pregnant, even though he had climbed out of his sick-bed, Bob had scrubbed the kitchen floor. After the twins were born, he washed diapers and dishes. That all stopped when he became a big-shot lawyer. Now he wouldn't lift a finger around the house.

Sarah, unlike Bob's parents, no longer doted on his every word. No wonder they believed his every pronouncement; by the time their son was in fifth grade, he had more education than either one of them. Sarah chuckled, remembering John's advice to his ten-year-old grandsons. "Boys," he'd said, "I read the newspaper every day. You should, too. Then you'll know what's going on in the world. If you read the newspapers, you don't need to read anything else."

Josh and Johnny were both readers like Sarah, and they laughed when they later reported their grandfather's advice. Bob, who had read his way through the Great Books

as a young man, no longer read anything but law books and newspapers. It looked as though he had taken his father's advice.

It was too dark for Sarah to read her wrist watch, but she knew it was late and wondered why the twins weren't home. She'd thought caring for two toddlers had been rough duty, but worrying about two eighteen-year-olds—who could make babies—gave her concerns a new dimension. Sarah worried about accidents—on the road and in the back seat. She wasn't ready to be a grandmother at thirty-eight. She was grateful they double-dated; it cut down opportunity. She'd have to talk to the twins about their late hours and the consequences of early fatherhood. Josh and Johnny thought they were big shots when they turned eighteen and could arrive home whenever they felt like it.

Sarah's mood changed abruptly as she thought about her handsome sons. Both were over 5'10", taller than their father. The twins, however, were definitely not identical. Johnny had inherited Bob's strong jaw, and Josh his crooked smile. Both of them blond like their father, their hair bleached from the sun, not from peroxide like their mother. They were considerate—most of the time—Sarah conceded to herself, then fretted again about their whereabouts. It seemed like only yesterday that she'd taught them to drive. Now they used her car more than she did.

When their transportation had been bikes and they'd been altar boys, she hauled herself out of bed at 5:30 A.M. so they wouldn't have to pedal in the rain. She chauffeured them to after-school activities and delivered their term papers to school if she hadn't finished typing them in time. Bob had never driven them anywhere. He thought he was a great father because once a year he took his sons fishing. He was the one who liked to fish.

Where the hell were the twins? Sarah was afraid she'd fall asleep tonight before they got home. Most nights she couldn't sleep until she heard the key in the door. She knew she worried too much, but two teenagers gave her twice as many reasons.

Had she worried her mother when she was a teenager? She doubted it. She had to obey the strict rules: home by 10:00 P.M. on week nights, and not one minute later; home promptly by midnight on weekends. No excuses tolerated.

Sarah lit another cigarette, her mind racing as unseen smoke clouded the dark room and she wondered how she'd deal with her loneliness once the twins left for college. The house would be so quiet without their high-jinx and laughter. If Josh or Johnny weren't acting like dopes, throwing imaginary basketballs at the light fixtures, they kept her up half the night discussing their "girl problems." Sarah had given them and their friends advice on everything from sex to shoe polish. She'd miss the whole group. Drawing her legs up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her knees, Sarah wondered when she'd find time to finish typing her own art history term paper. "Bet the twins graduate before I do," she mumbled, and uncoiled herself from the chair, knowing she'd never be able to cope tomorrow if she didn't get some sleep. Stumbling in the dark, she muttered as she bent over to massage her stubbed toe, and heard footsteps on the stairs overhead.

The kitchen light flipped on and there was Bob standing at the top of the stairs leading to the rec room. "When are you coming to bed?"

"Be there in a minute."

"What the hell are you doing down there in the dark?"

"Thinking."

"About what?"

"Nothing. I'm too tired to think."

"Well, come to bed then."

Ten minutes later, Sarah lay beside Bob in bed and said gently, "Bob, Honey, I'm really exhausted. Not tonight." Bob turned his back to Sarah with such vehemence the whole bed vibrated with his anger. He beat his fist into the pillow, tossed back and forth, and yanked the double blankets off Sarah. She tugged on one blanket, covered herself, still shivering from the cold, and moved to her edge of the double bed.

Finally she heard the key in the lock. Not long thereafter the toilet flushed twice and she heard the boys' bedroom doors shut. They were home safe and sound. Maybe now she could sleep.

Bob, still spiteful, rolled over, taking Sarah's blanket with him. She rolled toward him and tentatively laid a hand on his back. She gently caressed away his anger with hopes he would settle down to sleep, so she could. Instead, he turned to her and pulled her body into his arms. Within minutes, he topped her and she yielded in a ripple of pleasure. As Bob grunted his orgasm, Sarah whispered, "Not so loud. The boys may still be up."

Bob rolled off Sarah and laid on his back, his arms under his head and asked, "Why do you always say that? And at the worst possible moment?"

"I'm sorry. I really am. I just don't want the boys to hear us."

"Why the hell not? They're probably bouncing a few broads themselves. You know, a man with a stiff prick has no conscience!" Bob laughed as he drew Sarah's head to his shoulder. "I really needed you tonight, Honey. Glad you came through. Finally."

"Could you make love to anyone else?" Sarah asked.

"Not with someone like you at home. Now go to sleep, Sarah. I have a big day tomorrow."

"I love you, Bob."

"I love you, too. Now go to sleep."

Bob rolled away, and within minutes, Sarah could hear his rattled snore. She pinched his nose, but Bob's deviated septum won. He snored on while Sarah lay next to him unable to sleep. If Bob loved her why did she feel so empty and alone? She'd felt that way after her 1957 hysterectomy.

Wednesday morning Sarah dragged herself out of bed. Still in her nightgown, she stood at the kitchen counter mixing eggs and milk for French toast when the twins buzzed past her, blew kisses in her direction, and said simultaneously, "Sorry, Ma, gotta go, we'll be late," before dashing out the front door.

Thirty minutes later, showered and dressed, Sarah dashed out the front door, afraid she'd be late for her exam. In the classroom, forty minutes later, she stared at the blue examination book. With no time to study she prayed she'd remember something from the chapter.

Thursday morning at 9:30, she opened the door with a wide smile for her father-in-law and reached out for the paper bag he held. "Better let me carry that, it's full of carpet tacks," John said as he walked inside. "I don't want those tacks to stick you through the bag."

"How come it's okay for them to stick you?" Sarah asked and laughed.

"Upholsterers know all the tricks," he answered with a twinkle in his eye. "Wish I'd stayed an upholsterer and never let my brother talk me into becoming a bookmaker like him."

"Take off your jacket, Dad. Come sit at the table. The coffee's ready. I have saccharin for you and I baked some instant sweet rolls. Be sure to take your pill before you eat them. Sorry, I didn't have time to bake homemade."

John stirred the artificial sweetener into his coffee and said, "The world's going to hell in a hand basket. Every morning, when I walk to the corner to pick up a newspaper, the man at the stand tells me how rotten the world's become."

"I'll bet you said it first. Tomorrow, when you go to the newspaper stand, tell your friend, 'Today is beautiful. The world's terrific,' and I'll bet he'll agree with you."

"How do you know that?"

"I've tested my theory. If I say something negative, I get a negative response; but if I say something positive, I get a positive response. But, to tell the truth, I'm feeling pretty negative these days myself. I'm tired all the time. There's too much to do."

"What's to do? You have Jessie. Louise has all those kids, and no household help."

“Jessie’s retired, and Ida, the one I hired to replace her, made enough for her tithe at church, and quit last week. I haven’t had time to put an ad in the paper. Besides, they only came once a week for the heavy work.”

“You could simplify your life if you got rid of half the stuff you dust around here,” John said, as he waved his arm toward the bookshelves and the clutter of artifacts. John’s smile took the sting out of his words.

“What’s your major interest, Sarah?”

“My art.”

“Well, then, concentrate on that and drop all the other stuff, including college.”

Sarah moved to John’s side of the table and bent to kiss his cheek as she had often kissed her father’s. “I always feel better after we have a talk. Thanks, Dad. I’ll think about what you said.”

“Now let’s get to work, Sarah, or I’ll be here all day,” John said, as he rose from his chair. “I want to stop and see Louise and the kids on my way home.”

Sarah dialed Louise’s number, the phone clutched between her ear and shoulder, as she peeled potatoes. Ever since Bob’s sister had moved to Vanderville, the two women had talked their way through dinner preparations. When Lou answered, Sarah asked, “Can you talk?”

“Yeah, but I’m late getting dinner started. Dad had umpteen cups of coffee and stayed until past five. How about you?”

“Dad had umpteen cups of coffee when he was here, too. And after he left, I had a mess to clean up. Half the tacks he held in his mouth while he recovered the chairs landed on the floor, and I had to crawl around on my hands and knees to retrieve them. But he sure did a beautiful job. The chairs look great. He bragged about you and the kids.”

“And while he was here, all he did was brag about his son, Bob, the God, and rave about your accomplishments. He never mentioned me or my kids once.”

“He’s a riot.”

“I know.”

Sarah’s neck felt stiff and she switched the receiver to her other ear, and then began halving the potatoes. “What are you making for dinner, Lou?” she asked.

“Chicken Kiev.”

“How can you make those fancy meals with all you have to do?”

“It’s not fancy, and, besides, cooking is my only creative outlet. You have your art.”

“Yeah, right. When I’m in the kitchen, I think I should be in the studio. When I’m in the studio, I think I should be in the kitchen.”

“Well, both your studio and your kitchen are well equipped,” Louise laughed. “I don’t have to worry about conflict. Jim says my place is in the kitchen. Period. Oh, I get out of the kitchen once in a while—to deliver a baby.”

“Babies or not, you’d better start getting out once in a while or one day you’ll have an empty nest—like I will soon—and then you’ll be lost.”

“I know you’re right. I just can’t force myself. I’m not interested in other things like you are.”

“That’s my problem. I’m interested in too many things. John gave me some good advice. He told me to stop scattering my energy, to concentrate on one thing. So, I’ve made a decision. I’m not registering for college next semester. When and if I return, it will be full-time or not at all. I’m going into my studio and create art until the day I die.”

Three months later, Sarah’s life nearly ended.

CHAPTER 8

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell,
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

Sylvia Plath - Lazareth

Sarah lay on the doctor's examining table, her knees upraised, her bare feet in stirrups. The gynecologist babbled as he fingered up her vagina, removed his rubber gloves, and deposited them in the refuse can. Then he turned and said matter-of-factly, "Sarah, the partial ovary I left after your hysterectomy has developed a fast-growing tumor. How many years has it been since that operation?"

"Ten."

The doctor looked distracted as he pawed through Sarah's file. "You had some problem after that surgery? I can't seem to find my notes."

"A stitch slipped—I hemorrhaged and had to be taken back up to surgery."

Coughing nervously, Dr. Steiner said, "Oh yes, now I remember. Sometimes those things happen."

Five days after the hysterectomy, the starched white sheets had rubbed Sarah raw. Now she felt wet between her legs. Wiggling her hand under the tight top sheet she touched herself. Sarah pulled out her hand to find her fingers covered with bright red

blood. She tugged at the sheet and lifted it enough to peek underneath. The lower half of her body and the sheet beneath it were washed with blood.

Panic overrode her pain as she eased over on her side to ring for the nurse. The emergency button was not pinned to her pillow; the nurse had forgotten to repin it after Sarah's morning bath; it was out of reach.

Slowly she rolled over on her stomach and vomit filled her throat. She swallowed hard and inched her way across the bed until her outstretched arm could reach the phone cord. She held the cord with two fingers and slowly pulled.

With one hand Sarah held the shaking phone to her ear; with the other she dialed the hospital lobby. "This is room 312," she said, her voice hoarse and whispery. "I'm hemorrhaging. Tell the nurse." Then she passed out.

Dr. Steiner interrupted Sarah's thoughts. "I'm sorry," he said, "but the tumor will have to be removed, immediately."

"When I was twenty-nine you told me I needed a hysterectomy for my endometriosis, and I had a difficult time accepting it. A hysterectomy at that age was obscene. But I did accept it. Now another operation! No. I couldn't live through another surgery."

Unbuttoning his blue tweed sport coat, Dr. Steiner patted his mound of belly that was sagging below his belt buckle, laughed, and said with confidence, "Surgery's no big deal, Sarah. You have nothing to be concerned about."

No, nothing—just the surgery, the scars, the pain.

"You said immediately. Why can't I wait to have this operation? It's too sudden. I need time."

"You're asking a lot of questions, Sarah. It's awkward for you lying there on the examining table while we discuss this. Sit up."

Sarah removed her feet from the stirrups and sat with her legs dangling over the end of the table, the sheet across her lap, her fists clenched so tight her nails made indentations in her palms.

“I’ll need a date for the operation before you leave this room. Admittedly, you had a bit of bad luck, but a stitch pulling out is extremely rare. I’ve operated on over eight hundred people; what happened to you has never happened to any other patient of mine.”

Big deal! He was talented and she was rare.

“You never answered my question. Why do I need immediate surgery?”

“The tumor is growing fast. It could double in size in a week.” Dr. Steiner fiddled with the button on his jacket, hesitated, and then asked, “Do you want to hear the truth?”

Of course, she wanted to hear the truth. If she knew the truth, she could handle it. It was the lies and uncertainty that drove her wild.

“Yes.”

“There’s an outside chance the tumor may be cancerous. I doubt it seriously, but there’s no sense taking any chances. The sooner you have the operation, the sooner we biopsy a portion. Try not to dwell on it. There’s only one chance in a hundred that the tumor’s malignant.. You have nothing to worry about. Now, when may I admit you to the hospital?”

Sarah twisted her right wrist back and forth, then held her wrist with her left hand to still it. She felt trapped. There was no escape.

“I’ll need a week. My art work was accepted for an outdoor fair months ago. The fair’s this Sunday, and I don’t want to miss it.”

“What’s today? Hmm, Monday. Okay, one week, but not one day longer. I’ll have my nurse call the hospital and arrange for a bed.” Dr. Steiner looked at his pocket calendar, “Next Monday, September 1st.”

By the middle of the week, Sarah's tumor had doubled in size. She stood before the mirrored bathroom door, raised her caftan, held the material to her breasts, turned sideways, and stared into the mirror. She looked six months pregnant as she gently laid one hand on her stomach before she dropped the caftan. The skin under her fingers felt taut like the head on a snare drum.

Finding the hot pad on the closet shelf, Sarah plugged it in and retreated to bed. She lay on her back, her knees raised, and under the pad she moved her palms back and forth across her stomach. She felt as if giant fists were beating her from the inside. Then she pressed the hot pad to her stomach with both hands. Cancer! Sarah didn't want to consider the possibility of death. She was only thirty-nine. Sarah thought the suffering she'd experienced after her father's death would somehow protect her from future pain. Glancing out the trapezoid window, a blue jay winged past; the contrast was not lost on her—the bird flying free, while she was trapped.

She twisted her right wrist from habit and considered suicide, then laughed sardonically. She couldn't kill herself. There was probably some big rule in the sky. You didn't complete your work. You didn't pass go. You stopped before the game was finished. You're condemned to another lifetime.

Condemned to live again? No way. She'd have the damn operation, and, if she died, she wanted death to be forever. One lifetime of grief was more than enough. If all her suffering had been in vain, and there was no life after death, she'd have the tantrum that had been building up all her life. The seismograph could record her hysterics as fifteen points on the Richter scale. Yeah, a gigantic colossal earthquake if the Catholic church had lied to her.

On Sunday morning Sarah dressed in slacks and left the top three buttons open. She covered her ever-enlarging stomach with an overblouse. In the kitchen she swallowed a codeine tablet with sips of water and packed the codeine in a paper bag along with cheese, crackers, and apples. She directed Bob to her art work, stacked near

the front door. He packed the Buick, settled Sarah in the front seat, and handed her a round decorator pillow to hold against her stomach.

Bob listened to the Cubs game on the car radio while he drove the fifty miles to Lake Forest. Sarah's preoccupied mind tuned out the game and the static. Why was she putting herself through this? She wouldn't sell anything anyway. She rarely did. Well, at least she and Bob had one last chance to be alone. "It's a home run!" Home. Sarah wished she were home in bed.

During a commercial Bob asked, "Are you all right, Honey?"

"Yes, thanks for asking."

The commercial over, Bob's attention returned to the game.

In a tree-lined park artists hurried back and forth, carrying paintings and sculpture and set up their displays. Bob placed two folding chairs under a large oak tree and commanded, "Now sit still, Sarah. This is a nice shady spot. I'll empty the car and set up your work. You insisted on doing this show, and I insist you sit still all day."

What choice did she have? Sarah had to sit still, but she hated it. She wanted to set up her own work. She wanted to sing and dance and play, not sit here like an old woman clutching a pillow to her stomach.

The afternoon sun played peek-a-boo through the trees, and the leaves played tag in the gentle breeze, as Bob and Sarah sat side by side on the folding chairs holding hands and talking quietly.

"I'm sure it's not cancer, Sarah. Try not to worry. In another day or two this scare will end and we'll know for sure. Try to enjoy this beautiful weather and for now, at least, forget about the surgery." Bob squeezed Sarah's hand and said, "I love you, Honey." And then louder, "Oh, my God! Is that your mother coming across the grass?"

"Damn it! It is. I told her not to come. I didn't tell her about the possibility of cancer, but I definitely told her, in no uncertain terms, not to show up here today. I told her I wanted this time alone with you."

Elizabeth bustled up with a big smile. “I know you told me not to come Sarah, but it was such a beautiful day, and my friend Sylvia and I decided to take a ride . . . and we just found ourselves driving up here and . . .”

They drove thirty miles by accident! Sarah was fuming, as she pressed her lips together in disgust, and ignored her mother's ridiculous excuse. Bob stood, offered Elizabeth his chair, and then excused himself, saying, “I'm going to walk around and check out the other exhibits. I'll be back soon.”

Sarah stood and offered her chair to Elizabeth's friend, and for the rest of the afternoon the two older women sat on the folding chairs discussing “this fine weather—won't be too many days like this” and their blood pressure, while Sarah stood with her arms folded over the pillow and her stomach, or sat on the grass clutching the pillow to the center of her pain. She didn't complain or attempt conversation.

“You're not listening, Sarah.” Elizabeth scolded. “I'm telling you about the concert Sylvia and I attended, and I . . .”

On and on and on, Elizabeth's voice droned, while the sun moved across the sky, and Sarah, with no shade to protect her fair skin, sat on the grass perspiring. She prayed silently that Bob would soon return. She wanted to pack up her art work and leave. She was convinced that nothing would sell, and she was annoyed with her mother. She was sick of being polite, and prayed that her mother would leave before a real brawl broke out. Holding her tongue with great effort, Sarah remembered when she was fourteen and Elizabeth had covered her mouth with adhesive tape and left it there for two hours as a punishment for talking back.

Elizabeth finally stood, dusted off the front of her blue linen dress, and announced, “It's getting too hot for me, Sarah. Sylvia and I will leave now so you and Bob will have the time alone like you wanted.”

Sarah bit her lip.

At 7:00 P.M., home from the art fair, Sarah collapsed in bed and listened to Bob's lament. “I told you it would be too much for you. I told you to cancel.” He handed Sarah

a codeine tablet and held out a glass of orange juice. “Here, Honey, take this. It will help. Louise is downstairs. She wants to come up and talk to you. Do you feel up to it?”

“Give the pill ten minutes to work, and then tell her to come up.”

Eleven minutes later, Louise walked into the bedroom with a pained expression on her face. “Honest to God, Sarah, I don't know where you get the strength. I couldn't walk into a hospital the first time knowing an operation was ahead, let alone as many times as you have.”

“What else can I do?” Sarah pushed the sheet off her stomach, and Louise gasped.

“My God!”

“Tomorrow I'll be admitted in the hospital. The other times I had surgery, I thought it was a terrible inconvenience, a terrible waste of time. But this time is different. This time I'm not going to make it. I'm going to die. I'm telling you this, Louise, so that after it happens, you'll know that I knew. But, don't mention what I said to Bob or the boys, or anyone.”

“Sarah, you're talking crazy.”

Sarah didn't argue. She knew, or thought she did.

In the morning, she stood at the curb waiting for Bob to back the car out of the double garage. Smiling wanly at her sons, who were standing by her side, Sarah remembered that the twins were born on a beautiful day like this. She glanced upward at the trees and wondered if she'd live long enough to see them turn russet. Would she live to experience another season?

Josh's arm held his mother from one side and Johnny's from the other as both sons kissed her cheeks and wished her luck.

“Boys, take good care of yourselves and your father while I'm in the hospital. Don't stay out late, and please, please don't drink and drive.” Bob had often bragged to Sarah about the binges he'd experienced even before his eighteenth birthday and Sarah prayed her sons didn't imitate their father's behavior.

She freed herself from the twins embrace, kissed them individually and asked, “If I’m not back before you leave for college, do you think you’ll be able to pack your own clothes?”

“Don’t worry about us, Mom,” Josh volunteered.

“We’ll handle everything,” Johnny added.

Sarah swallowed hard to keep from crying, kissed her sons again, eased herself into the Buick and positioned herself next to Bob who had already started the engine.

At Passavant Hospital Bob guided Sarah up the cement steps, his arm wrapped around her to give support. He tried to be reassuring, “You’ll make it, Honey. Don’t worry. I’ll stay with you.”

In the hospital lobby Bob settled in a comfortable chair and fiddled with the lock of Sarah’s Samsonite case, while she answered the registrar’s questions.

“How old are you, Mrs. Shallot? What’s your address? Have you been a patient at Passavant before? Do you have insurance?” Sarah answered the seemingly endless stream of questions, while nervously blowing her nose. She couldn’t cry in front of a stranger.

Bob stayed with Sarah in room 419 until the resident came in to take her medical history. Then he excused himself, saying, “Honey, as long as I’m downtown, I’ve got some titles to search. I’ll be back before your dinner arrives.” As he bent down to kiss Sarah she said, “Hurry back.”

For two hours Sarah was weighed, measured, poked for blood samples, and then left to stare at the wall. She picked up *Woman’s Day* and flipped through it. Why did she bring a magazine? She was too nervous to read. Besides, women’s magazines were nothing but four pages of exercises and five pages of fattening food.

At 5:30 P.M. Sarah sat up in bed and stared at her dinner plate. As she pushed the peas to one side with her fork, Bob rushed into the room.

“Sorry, Honey, I couldn’t find a cab for the life of me.” He plunked down in a chair and said, “I’m pooped. What a day! Only finished half the work I wanted to.”

He glanced around the stark white room and then turned to Sarah and said, “God, I hate hospitals. I hate the smell of disinfectant and starch. What did they serve you?”

“Steak and mashed potatoes. Peas.”

Bob pulled his chair closer to the bed and nibbled on Sarah's untouched dinner. “Come on, you've got to eat something to keep up your strength,” he said, holding a spoonful of peas under Sarah's nose.

“I don't want to give ammunition to the enema I'll have in the morning. You know I hate enemas more than operations. My mother loved to give me enemas. She'd jab that damn tube up my ass at the slightest provocation and, no matter how I cried and pleaded, she wouldn't remove the thing from my rear until the red enema bag was completely empty. I swear, she got her kicks from jamming that tube up my ass. My mother was enema crazy.”

“Ah, come on. Your mother's not so bad. My mother was keen on enemas, too, but I don't make her into an ogre.”

In no mood to defend her position, Sarah changed the subject. “We sound like those two teenage campers discussing their bowel habits. When I was a girl I was too shy to even tell a movie date I had to use the bathroom.”

“Yeah, you practically turned yellow before you told me. On one of our dates, you finally braved it and asked me to take the next exit and stop at a gas station.”

Sarah giggled, “That's when I knew I loved you. My father always said, 'Just hold it,' but you found me a gas station, pronto.”

“Do you remember that camping trip to upstate New York?” Bob asked. “The twins must have been about ten, and we paid them a quarter apiece to carry the bags from the portable potty to the dumpster.”

Bob searched Sarah's eyes and squeezed her hand, and they burst into laughter simultaneously. “Yeah, Bob, I remember. Those two innocent kids carried those transparent bags to the garbage . . .”

“We could see the shit bounce back and forth inside the clear plastic as the bags hit their legs.”

Sarah held her stomach and pleaded. “Don't make me laugh. It hurts too much. I'm sure my father's daughter. I hear the word 'shit,' and I'm convulsing with laughter. What's your excuse?” Sarah laughed again despite herself.

“Remember the night we sat around the campfire and you told ghost stories? We heard a trumpet somewhere across the lake, and we all stopped talking to listen. It was pitch-black, no moon, the stars bright enough to see the Big Dipper. We sat quietly, even the twins, and listened to that trumpet, as the flames turned to burning red embers. That music came across the water clear as a bell. It was so very quiet, almost magical, as we listened to our old favorites. That unknown musician must have played for over an hour and, when he finished, we applauded. We could hear applause from all around the lake.” Sarah sighed, then added, “We've had some wonderful times together.”

“You make it sound like we're never going to have them again. You just hurry and get well, and we'll go camping—just the two of us. I'll put on my white peaked captain's cap and take off my tie.” Bob pulled at the tight tie knotted at his throat, and said, “You always say, when I put on my vacation hat I'm more fun.”

“You are. On vacation you're like your old self, the boy I fell in love with, not tied up in knots after a day in the office, all crabby and irritated.”

“Okay, I get the point. I'm leaving while I'm still ahead.” Bob laughed as he rose to his feet.

“Wait, just another minute. Do you remember that the trumpeter played our song that night?”

“I remember,” Bob said, as he walked to the bed, and kissed Sarah gently on the lips. “I Love You for Sentimental Reasons—our song. I love you more now than on the day we met. As soon as you're well, we'll go on that camping trip. And, if we're lucky, we'll see the autumn colors at their peak. I love you, Sarah. Now get some sleep. You need your strength for tomorrow.”

Bob tossed in a comfortable bed at a nearby Holiday Inn, while Sarah twisted uneasily in a rough-sheeted and firm hospital bed—both of them wide awake and fearful of what was to come. Bob had comforted Sarah with his late night phone call. “I’ll be with you in the morning, even before the nurse comes in to give you your shot. Try not to worry, Honey, and get some sleep. I love you. I promise, I’ll be in your room first thing in the morning.”

Bob overslept. By the time he arrived in room 419 at 6:30, Sarah's speech was already faint and garbled. The nurse had prepped her and administered the sedative. The orderlies arrived five minutes after Bob and lifted Sarah onto the gurney. Bob held Sarah's hand as the orderlies wheeled her down the corridor. He heard Sarah's last words before the elevator door closed in front of him, “My bootie. My bootie slipped off. I hope they don't amputate my foot by mistake, like that client of yours.”

Six hours later, Sarah's eyes blinked open to find Bob bent over her bed. He kissed her cheek and said, “You made it, Honey. The tumor's benign.”

Another hour passed before Sarah twisted her neck to the right and faced Bob, who sat next to the bed holding her hand, his eyes closed. She limply squeezed his hand and Bob opened his eyes. “Thank you, Honey,” she whispered, “I couldn't go through this without you.”

“You'll make it,” Bob said, as he wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. “You're the most courageous woman I've ever met. Hang tough, sweetheart.” He caressed her hand between his palms, “I love you, Honey. Get well for me.”

For over twenty years Bob had said, “I love you,” but his actions rarely matched his words. Sarah never quite believed him. Now, as he sat by her side and held her hand, she believed, but doubted that she could regain her strength, even for him.

The nurse administered a shot for pain, but before Sarah drifted into a drugged sleep, she heard Bob whisper, “She's so fragile, so pale. I don't know how she can stand this agony time after time. I know I never could.”

Day by day, Bob waited impatiently for Sarah's condition to improve. On the fourth morning after surgery, Bob stopped to see her on his way to court. He found her drugged and mumbling about incredible pain. He waited in the hall outside her room to talk to Dr. Steiner during morning rounds. With agitation in his voice, Bob asked, "Why isn't Sarah's condition improving?"

On Bob's evening visit, he reported, "Honey, Dr. Steiner said you'll improve gradually. I told him you don't complain unless the pain is severe. You're not a complainer. I told him that."

Sarah's complaints increased each time Bob visited. "The painnn in my back is 'exquisite.' Thasss the only way to describe it. It's more than excruciating."

Each morning when the doctor or resident examined Sarah, she'd feel pain when his hand was an inch above her waist and more when he touched her. Her back pain was more severe than her scarred stomach. "Why Bob? Why?" she asked repeatedly.

Bob had no answer as he wiped Sarah's tears with a fold of white sheet. Sarah's voice was barely a whisper as she whimpered, "I caaan't ssstand the pain." Each morning when the nurse forced Sarah out of bed, she had to use both hands to lift Sarah's right leg over the bed side. Sarah's face scrunched in "exquisite" pain as she tried to explain her agony and pleaded once more, "Booob, whasss wrong with me? I can't stand this pain much longer."

For five days Bob waited for Dr. Steiner in the hall or called him at the office. Each time the doctor reassured him, "There's nothing to worry about, Mr. Shallot. Sarah's a slow healer."

At 5:00 P.M. on the sixth day, Dr. Steiner's resident stood over Sarah's bed and ordered, "Sign this release. You're going back up to surgery."

"My brain's fuzzy. I can't read it."

"Don't argue with me! If you don't sign this release, you're going to die."

"Please," Sarah pleaded, "dial my husband's number, 463-9292. He's still in his office. My eyes won't focus, and I must speak to him. He'll tell me what to do."

In a voice barely audible, Sarah whispered into the phone, “Booob, the doctor says I’m going to die if I don’t go back up to surgery. You told me never to sign anything without reading it, and I’m too weak. Should I sign it?”

“Sarah, Honey, let me talk to the doctor.”

Sarah handed the phone to the resident and listened to him say, “There’s something wrong with her kidney. She has to return to surgery immediately. Her right kidney has stopped functioning No, we don’t know what’s wrong with her kidney. Tell her to sign the release immediately. We’re taking her right up to surgery. The doctor’s on his way. If we don’t operate immediately, it may be too late.”

The resident handed the phone back to Sarah, and she listened to Bob insist, “Sign that release, Sarah, even if you can’t read it. I’ll be there before you go up to surgery.”

“Hurry, Bob. I want to see you before I go up. I might die and never see you again. Please hurry.”

The nurse prepped Sarah again, dressed her in white for yet another surgery, and securely fastened her booties. Once again, the orderlies gurneyed her down the corridor. This time no one held her hand. She was under anesthesia and the scalpel an hour before a harried Bob rushed into an empty Room 419. He hurried back down the hall to the nurse’s station and pleaded, “Where’s my wife?”

CHAPTER 9

The nurse reported, “Your wife's been in surgery for over an hour Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Shallot. It may be a long night.”

Bob settled into a hardback chair in the waiting room his long legs stretched out in front of him as he leaned back and leaned his head back against the wall. He tried to unwind as his mind replayed the wild trip from Vanderville to Chicago. He'd watched the train depart from the Hegwich station as he parked the Buick and he realized he'd have to drive.

On the freeway he pressed his foot to the accelerator, and the speedometer raced from 55 to 60 to 75. He kept his eye on the rear view mirror, watching for a flashing red light and he arrived in Chicago before the train, but not before Sarah's second surgery in less than a week.

“Damn it,” he muttered, and cracked his knuckles out of habit. He was exhausted from a week of visiting the hospital every day and now this. The office was falling apart and he worried, “What if Sarah dies?”

By 3:00 am. the waiting room had emptied. The expectant fathers had left with smiles on their faces, while Bob continued to pace back and forth, praying and swearing under his breath and pacing back and forth until dawn.

At 5:30, Dr. Steiner found Bob huddled in a chair sipping coffee. “We operated all night. I'm exhausted,” the doctor said. “It's been a long night.”

“You bet it's been a long night,” Bob said, getting to his feet. “How's Sarah?”

“She came through the surgery and is in Intensive Care. In another hour you can see her. You'll be able to visit five minutes every hour. Don't be upset by the way she looks. Two operations in a week have taken their toll. Sarah lost so much weight, I called in a children's surgeon to operate; of course, I assisted. It's been a hell of a night,

standing on my feet for over eight hours. I'm exhausted. I'm going home to grab an hour's sleep before my morning rounds."

"Wait, Doctor. What was wrong with Sarah's kidney? And why did it take you so long to discover it?"

"I'm too tired to discuss it now, Mr. Shallot. I'll catch up with you later."

"Like hell you will!" Bob exploded, as his body stretched upward to his full height. He glared at the gyneecologist and insisted, "No way am I waiting for an explanation! I'm exhausted, too. Now, what the hell are you keeping from me? What was wrong with Sarah's kidney? She didn't have anything wrong with her kidneys before you operated last week."

"Now, now, Mr. Shallot, relax. I know we're both tired. If you insist, I'll explain." Dr. Steiner inhaled deeply and stared at the wall over Bob's shoulder. "You know, uh, you see, well, this is the way it happens sometimes."

"Damn it, stop beating around the bush. What happened?"

Dr. Steiner, still dressed in his surgeon blues, patted his stomach. "Well," he said, "you know, medicine is an art, not a science. And, well, Sarah's insides were matted with adhesions from her other surgeries. All her organs were closely packed. And, well, through no fault of my own, six stitches were sewed into her ureter before we closed her up after the first surgery. Well, ah, her kidney had stopped functioning. These things happen."

The chart hanging at the foot of Sarah's bed in Intensive Care read: Weight, 79 pounds. Condition: Unstable. Medication: Demerol, mix with 2 cc's Vistaril for potency. Administer every three hours. 104

Intravenous solution and blood dripped through needles taped to Sarah's hand. Tubes from her nostrils drained into a glass bottle on the bedside table. Two tubes extended through the skin of her abdomen and inched their way under the sheets. The tubes hung over the side of the bed and traced a pattern across the wooden floor. Under

the bed, the tubes emptied into two bottles—one filling with urine, the other with pus and bile.

There were no clocks, windows, radios, phones, or televisions in Intensive Care. Machines, drugs, and nurses were the only hope for ten men and women hovering between life and death. Ten men and women side by side, the curtains open between their beds. A nurse, at her station near the door, watched these human-animals writhe in pain and heard them scream, moan, fart, and wretch. Intensive Care, a maw of hell, wreaked like a monkey cage.

Six stitches had been removed from Sarah's urethra, and the damage repaired. Now her right kidney functioned, but the exquisite pain had been replaced by pain so severe that the agony felt like a tiger clawing and mauling inside her abdomen.

She slipped in and out of consciousness as the anesthesia wore off but the dream that had begun that first morning in Intensive Care continued. She dreamt that she raced in concentric circles round a gigantic clock. A voice of authority, amplified over a loud speaker, ordered: "HURRY. RUN." as Sarah knifed through fragments of blood-soaked cloth. "RUN FASTER, the voice commanded, "HURRY!" FASTER! FASTER! You have to make up for all the wasted split-seconds. Time is slipping away. Death is gaining on you." Sarah's dream body raced in circles and every split-second a scalpellic punishment tortured her from pubis to bellybutton. Her heart pounding as an opponent raced beside her round and round the clock.

"YOU WON!" the dream voice bellowed. "You beat him by a split second."

Pain smashed the dream and the pain ran in and out of Sarah's body like hurricane waves pounding at the shore, each crash of agony more obscene than the last. Her hair hung in damp wisps around her face, while she moaned and rolled her head from side to side. Whimpering in anguish, she pleaded, "God, please God, don't let me die. I don't want to die. I'm too young. The twins need me.

"YOU BASTARD!" You said surgery was a snap."

Somewhere in the room a disembodied voice squealed, “MYYYYYY HEADDDDDDD! MYYYYYY HEAD! HELLLP MEEEEEEE!” “HELLP! PLEASE PLEASE HELLP ME!”

Unwiped tears streamed down Sarah's face as she stretched her neck to the right and pleaded, “WET ME GO!” Delirious, she whimpered like a three-year-old entreating, “NO! NO! Me's a bad girl. N0”

“Eat your candy and be quiet.”

At 6:00 a.m. Bob entered Intensive Care for his first five-minute visit. He felt squeamish as he looked at his wife lying torpid, the sheet pulled taut across her rigid body. One pale hand lay limp above the sheet, immobilized by the intravenous needles taped to the wooden pallet beneath. Mucous and round balls of yellow phlegm lumped and discolored the front of Sarah's hospital gown. Tubes extended from her body in every direction and her eyes remained shut.

Bob bent over the woman he barely recognized, and whispered, “I'm here, Honey. It's Bob. Fight Sarah. You'll make it. I need you. Get well for me.”

Bob, sleepless for over twenty-four hours when he next entered Intensive Care, had circles under his eyes that almost matched Sarah's. He looked at his wife and wondered if she even knew he was there. Her eyes fluttered from time to time but remained closed.

When he re-entered Intensive Care at 11:30 A.M. Sarah's eyes were open but they were glazed and unfocused. Bob squeezed her hand and whispered, “It's me, Honey. Sarah inched her free hand from beneath the sheet and touched Bob's sleeve. She longed to speak but she was too weak.

At 12:30 P.M., Bob bent low over Sarah's bed to hear the words she struggled to say. He held his breath, she smelled foul, but he squeezed her hand and listened to her bleat, “Please, Booby, please help. The nurse misread my chart.”

“The doctor raised his voice and said through gritted teeth “Damn it nurse pay more attention you misread her chart. She's supposed to receiver Demerol every three hours, not every eight. Lucky for you, she's out of it anyway.”

“Make the nurse give me my shot.”

Bob asked Sarah another question and, receiving no response, assumed she'd received her shot. In fact, she had passed out from pain.

Lapsing in and out of consciousness, Sarah listened to her partners in suffering scream; unsure whether the screams she heard were her own. A nurse passing Sarah's bed carried an armload of white towels and heard the patient and she pleaded “The doctor said. Please, please give me my shot.”

The nurse bared brilliant white teeth as she curled her lips in and glared. Without saying a word, she turned on her heel and yanked the curtain between the beds closed isolating Sarah from her neighboring sufferers.

“MY HEADDDDD! MY HEADDDDD! LET MEEEE OUTTTT!

“Me's scaredid. Me be good. Me promise.”

The curtain was pulled back when Sarah next opened her eyes. She stared at the nurse with the brilliant white teeth who stood near the door and screamed, “This is a zoo. Thank God my shift is over!”

The light in Intensive Care remained dim twenty-four hours a day, and Sarah wondered if it was night or day as she heard a machine scrape across the wooden floor. Rubber-soled shoes squeaked and rushed past the foot of her bed. Someone hissed, “Hurry! Plug that damn thing in. We're losing him!” Then the noise and confusion decreased and Sarah heard, “It's too late. He's gone.”

Hurry. Faster, faster. Run faster.

“MY HEADDDDD! MY HEADDDDD! HELP MEEEE!”

Sarah moaned and mumbled, “Help him.” She fingered the tubes that irritated her nostrils, and a nurse barked, “Stop that right now!” Sarah's eyes remained fixed on the nurse until the woman turned her back, then she continued tugging at the tubes, slowly

pulling them out. She'd thought the tubes were only in her nose. Now tubes were curling under her chin and she couldn't stop with them half in and half out.

Sarah yanked a yard of quarter-inch thick yellow tubing out of her nostrils and pushed the tubes off the bed with her free hand. The bottle, attached to the tubes on the bedside table, crashed to the floor; mucous and phlegm splattered on top of the broken glass. A nurse rushed to the sound of the crash, looked at the mess on the floor and screamed, "You bitch!" as she firmly adjusted Sarah's sheet and turned on her heels.

Minutes later the nurse returned, jabbed a hypodermic needle into Sarah's hip and soon Sarah was drifting into painless never-never land.

Awake and in pain, Sarah turned her face toward her mother's voice and peered through the raised bedrails at her linen skirt.

Elizabeth bent over the rails and whispered, "I'm here, baby. It's Mother."

"How long have I been here?"

"This is the third day."

"Where's Bob?"

"He'll be here this afternoon."

Elizabeth took Sarah's free hand between her own and whispered, "It's me, Mother. Please live for me. Get well for me."

Sarah stared up over the bars of her "crib" and looked at Elizabeth staring down.

"Baby, it's Mother. I'd change places with you in a second if I could. Please, please get well for me."

Hallucinating, Sarah whimpered, "Don't hit me, Mommy. I promise to be good," and heard the mother of her childhood reply: "You're a naughty girl, Sarah Mindel. Stop pulling at your panties! You're a bad girl touching yourself between your legs. That's your private part. Don't touch it."

"NOOOOO! Mommy said, NO!" Sarah mumbled. "It's a bad, girl."

A sharp pain grabbed at Sarah and she winced. She was filled with hate for the idiot who had bungled her first surgery. Her eyes closed, Sarah drifted off.

An hour later, Elizabeth arrived for her next five-minute visit. “Sarah baby, I’m here,” she whispered. “It’s me, Mother. Bob’s stuck in court. Are you feeling better, baby?”

“Mom. Please, please get me out. I’ll die if I don’t get out of here. Where’s the clock? What time is it? Mom, is that you? Mommy, Mommy please help me. I want Santee. Call Santee, she’ll take care of me. Get me out of here before I die.”

Early in the afternoon Bob re-entered Intensive Care, his briefcase a dead weight in his hand. He found Sarah, weak but awake, and said, “You look better, Honey, with those tubes out of your nose.”

“I, I pulled them out . . . the nurse yelled.” Sarah’s words were garbled as she whispered, “This is hell. Please, Bob, please get me out of here. Everybody screams. It smells like death. Someone died. Am I going to die? I, I pulled out the tubes. The nurse....”

“Sarah, the nurse told me those tubes were connected to your lungs and stomach. They’ve put you on an inhalation machine so you won’t get pneumonia. You’re a fighter, but do what the nurses tell you. They’re on your side. If they yell, it’s for your own good.”

Sarah’s free hand balled in a fist and her jaw tightened as she remembered her mother shouting, “Sarah Mindel, I’m spanking you for your own good. I want you to be a good girl. I want to be proud of you.”

“Sarah, Honey, it’s me, Bob. Do you feel any better? I want you well and out of this hospital. God, you’ve got guts pulling out those tubes, but Honey, don’t do anything like that again.”

Don’t you dare to do that again. SARAH MINDEL! Stop that right this minute.

Bob bent to kiss Sarah’s gaunt cheek and recoiled from her breath. He squeezed her hand, rather than kissing her, and said, “I’ve got to go now.”

In a weak voice, Sarah asked “Do I repulse you?”

“Of course not. It's just that I have to get back to court, I'm on my lunch break.”

Sarah tried to smile, but the smile was trapped in a grimace as tears cascaded down her cheeks. “No. No, please don't leave.”

Bob dabbed at her tears with the sheet, squeezed her hand again, and whispered, “I have to leave, Sarah, or the nurse won't let me back in for my next five minutes. Hang on, Honey, I'll be back later.”

Soon after he left, Sarah drifted back and forth between delirium and reality.

Pay attention! I'm a person. I'm dying. I'm afraid to die. Pay attention! I have a new dress, a new refrigerator and a new car. Pay attention! If people knew, they wouldn't like me. Pay attention!

“NURSE! NURSE!”

Pay attention! I'm suffering! Daddy? Daddy, why did you leave me? Don't leave me, Bob. Please don't leave. Momm! You promised!

“Fuck you! Prick!” Words Sarah learned from her father and her husband spewed from her lips. “Shit! Son of a bitch!” Sarah was in pain. She wasn't a lady, a wife, a mother, a daughter or a niece. She cursed death and wondered, “Is death the final injustice?”

A young nurse with a gap between her two front teeth bent over Sarah's bed and gently pushed a bent straw between her lips, saying, “Drink slowly. I know you're thirsty, but only take sips; you're still on intravenous.”

The first sip of water caressed Sarah's dry tongue, while her thoughts and jumbled words remained a stream of unconsciousness.

Hurry. Hurry. Faster. Run faster. Death is gaining on you. Hurry, the guests will arrive any minute. Hurry, clean the toilets, make the beds, and set the table.

“There's no blue soap for the blue bathroom!”

“God, please let me live.”

Bending over her patient to remove the straw, the nurse asked, "What did you say? Are you in pain?"

NO! You may not finish reading that paragraph. Get in the kitchen and do the dishes, NOW!

"I can't stand this pain." *Hail Mary full of grace . . .*

"Sarah, baby, I'm here. It's Mom. I've taken care of everything. I called Dr. Steiner. I told Bob I'd pay for round-the-clock nurses; I called him at his office. By this evening you'll be out of Intensive Care. Santee will be waiting in your room. She hasn't been reassigned since you went back up to surgery. Santee wants to nurse you back to health. Please get well. For me. I love you, baby. I prayed to your Daddy last night and asked him to let me have you for a while longer."

"I'm going to die."

"No, baby, no, you won't die," Elizabeth said and left Intensive Care dabbing at her reddened eyes. Pain stabbed and gnawed uninterrupted by Sarah's hallucinations.

Is there a Catholic heaven? Will they let me in? I'm a Jew. What if God's black? I'm the wrong color. What if God's a woman? I'm not a woman anymore. I have nothing left inside.

And the shepherd sheared his lambs and marked them with blue dye and red dye. In the dark all lambs look alike. In the night a thief stole the child's innocence.

"I'm going to die."

Sorry about your father, Miss.

Sarah clawed at her hair while Santee, her caring nurse, stuffed a pillow between her legs. Sarah tossed and tried to turn over but Santee said, "Try not to move, Honey. Remember, the tubes from your stomach are connected to your kidney."

On her back, Sarah's head railed from side to side while Santee wiped the damp hair from her forehead and whispered, "You'll make it Sarah. I'll take good care of you like I did before."

“Santee! Santee!”

“I’m here,” came a soft voice as Santee stretched over Sarah’s crib sides to kiss her patient on the cheek. “You’ll make it, Honey. Hang on.”

Staring up at her caretaker’s beautiful black face, Sarah flashed an expression of thanks into Santee’s compassionate brown eyes. Then she closed her own eyes and fell back into a drugged sleep.

“Stay still, Sarah. Remember your tubes.”

Get back in bed, Sarah Mindel. Stay in that bed. You don’t want anyone to see your naked body! You’re a naughty girl. I took your clothes off.

No, no. No farm. Me . . . no!

Drugged, Sarah raved on. Her mouth a wound-up music box.¹¹³

Good. Good. Puleeze, Grammy, take me home with you.

Mommy? Where’s my Mommy? She promised.

Santee helped her patient turn on her side, fluffed a fresh pillow and replaced the one between Sarah’s legs. She positioned another pillow under her arms and said, “Squeeze the pillow, Honey. It will comfort you.”

“Comfort” was the only word Sarah heard. She wanted comfort, but nothing comforted her, not her body or her jumbled memories of past and present. One minute she was a three-year-old child, and the next an adult picking out her father’s casket.

Let me show you our finest casket, Mrs. Shallot. Your father deserves nothing but the best. Now this one for \$1,500 is lined in red velvet. It’s our most expensive model and only for the most discriminating and tasteful burial. I’m sure you’ll choose this for your beloved.

I can’t see the red velvet. Open the casket. I want to see my father’s face.

Santee wrote on her report: the patient’s condition is poor. She is hallucinating almost constantly.

“SNAKES! SNAKES!” Sarah screamed as another horrible memory surfaced.

“Snake spits on me.!”

The worm's crawl in, the worm's crawl out. They crawl all over your teeth and mouth.

Sarah Mindel, don't you dare use those words. I'll wash your mouth out with soap. Ladies don't swear."

Josh sat beside his mother's bed and held her hand without speaking and Johnny stood at the foot of Sarah's bed, his face mirroring his mother's anguish.

Johnny, wash your hands and face. Dinner's ready.

Josh, I'll wash your mouth out with soap if I ever hear you use those words again."

Trapped gas exploded from Sarah, and she mumbled, "Excuse me. I'm sorry."

Ladies don't fart. Ladies don't sweat, they perspire.

All the bottled up venom shattered as Sarah spewed out her secrets. She cursed and swore, unaware she spoke.

Santee turned Sarah from her side to her back and wiped her face with a damp washcloth. She smoothed down the sheet, fluffed the pillow, adjusted the intravenous needle in Sarah's arm, and replaced the almost empty bottle of intravenous solution with a new one. "Sarah your sons left while you were sleeping. They said to tell you they love you."

No one loves me. I'm all alone. Santee patted Sarah's free hand. "Now stay in this position until I return. I'm going for a quick cup of coffee, and I'll bring it back with me. Stay still, Sarah. I won't be long."

"Santee! Santee!" Sarah shouted to the empty room as her laxatived intestine exploded and she lay in her own excrement. She shrieked, "Santee! Santee! Help me!" as her bottom slipped in her feces. Filth and bile oozed and exploded from her anus.

"I'm dirty. Help me."

Shame, shame on you.

Sam, Sam, the shit house man. Flip flop, hear the turds drop. Thasss Sam, the shit house man.

“Santee! Santee!” Sarah bellowed as her out-of-control bowels belched crap and soiled her skin from knee to waist. Despoiled, Sarah sunk deeper in mire as she tried in vain to reach the button pinned to her pillow.

Be sure to wear clean panties every day. Never wear underwear with a tear, you might have an accident.

“I’ve had an accident. PLEASE SOMEBODY, HELLLLP MEEEE!”

A floor nurse passing Sarah's room heard her scream and poked her head in the door and ordered, “Stop that screaming. You're disturbing the other patients.”

“I’m sorry, but please help me. I've had an accident.” Sarah lifted up the sheet and pointed.

The nurse raised the sheet high, gasped, and then slid a bedpan into the mashed shit. With pain, Sarah raised her hips and lowered her bottom to the ice-cold aluminum. Sarah's seventy-seven pounds pressed the bedpan deeper into the mire. She raised her knees and pressed her heels against the bedpan to steady it, and shit oozed over her legs and feet.

Santee returned, holding a cup of coffee in her hand and said, “I'm sorry it took so long. The cafeteria was packed. The line to the register went on forever. Then I couldn't get an elevator . . .”

“Santee, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I've had an accident.”

Santee raised the sheet, looked at the filled bedpan, shit in the bedpan and beneath it. She cursed the floor nurse, “Damn her. Why'd she give you the bedpan when it was already too late. Now, I'll have to scrub the pan as well as clean you.”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

Shame on you, Sarah Mindel.”

“Honey, you don't have to apologize. You couldn't help it. It wasn't your fault. I'm not mad at you, Sarah. Honest. What I'd like to do is make that floor nurse clean this bedpan. It's covered with shit, top to bottom. In fact,” Santee laughed, “I'd like to push her smug face right into it.”

“That's it, Sarah, I made you smile. See it's not so bad. We'll have a good laugh over this when you feel better.”

“I'm so ashamed. *Who killed my father? Why doesn't he come to see me? Bob? Does anybody love me?*”

“I love you, Sarah. I know I'm not supposed to get emotionally involved with my patients, but, before they took you down to surgery the second time, you'd lost so much weight that you looked like a pretty little girl in a crib and my heart went out to you. As sick as you are we have some good laughs. Now you'll be able to tell your kids a story about your 'accident' like your father told you about falling into the hole below the outhouse when his friends pushed the outhouse over.”

“Santee, I'm so sorry. I tried to hold it. I tried. Honest I tried.”

“It's okay, Sarah. I understand. I know you didn't do it on purpose.” Santee gently washed Sarah, changed her hospital gown and her bed linens and then wrapped the offensive bedpan in towels and left the room to wash it.

Gifts, cards and flowers filled Sarah's hospital room. She was still too drugged to read the cards, and asked Santee to remove the flowers. “They make me nauseous... quick, the pan.”

The floor nurses avoided Sarah's room. Santee whispered to her patient, “They only visit with patients they're sure will make it. They don't know you like I do, Sarah. You'll make it.”

I don't care if I make it or not. Please, God, let me die.

Bob approached Sarah's bed and kicked the bottles beneath it as he bent to kiss Sarah's cheek. She screamed and pleaded, “Bob, please don't kick those bottles. They're connected to me. Every time you kick them, the tubes tug on my stomach, and it hurts like hell.”

“I'm sorry.”

After an hour's visit, watching Sarah and listening to her hallucinate, Bob rose from his chair to leave and kicked the bottles again; he was angry, not clumsy.

In the hall outside Sarah's open door a floor nurse complained in a raspy voice, "That bitch in 450 asked me to comb her hair. I'm a nurse, not a beautician."

During the night Sarah's pain intensified. The night nurse who sat next to her bed said, "Stop being such a baby. Other people have worse pain."

"Have you ever been ill?" Sarah asked. "Have you ever had surgery?"

"No."

"Have you ever had a baby?"

"No."

"Then you've never experienced horrendous pain. You know nothing about it. Don't tell me what I'm supposed to feel and how I'm supposed to act. Get out of here right now and don't come back. You're fired."

When Bob next visited and after he apologized for kicking the bottle beneath Sarah's bed, he asked, "Why did you fire your night nurse?"

"I'm going to die. I won't need her anymore."

"Don't talk like that. You can't die, Sarah. I need you."

Santee wrote on Sarah's chart, "The patient says she is going to die. Her condition is poor."

For ten days and nights following Sarah's second surgery in a week her serial nightmares continued, the amplified voice in her dream shouted, "RUN FASTER. HE'S GAINING ON YOU!"

On the eleventh night, a new private-duty nurse found her patient sitting bolt upright in bed. Sarah waved a bent arm round and round in a circle next to her head like an out-of-control hand on a gigantic clock.

The nurse tried to lower Sarah's stiffened arm, but Sarah yelled, "NO! I know what I'm doing. I Won!" Clearly and deliberately, Sarah announced, "My name is Sarah Mindel Shallot. I live at 2133 Van Dyke Drive, Vanderville, Illinois. My husband's name is Bob. John's going to die. I'm going to live."

The night nurse wrote on Sarah's chart: "The patient says she is going to live."
The doctor charted "The patient's condition is much improved."

Dr. Steiner's Resident read Sarah's chart, and told a student nurse standing next to him "Somehow, they seem to know. When a patient says they'll live or die, I believe them. How about living it up with *me* tonight?" he said and winked. "Let's make whoopie. I'm sick of death. That woman in 449 died this morning."

Two days later the private-duty night nurse that Sarah had fired popped her head inside the door and asked timidly, "May I come in?"

Sarah nodded, and the woman walked to the foot of the bed and said, "I've come to apologize. I'm new at this. I'm really sorry. I learned a lot from you."

A floor nurse dropped in to see Sarah and asked, "How are you getting along? My son was in Intensive Care when you were."

"Is your son okay?"

"Yes, thank God."

"That man who screamed, 'My head, my head,' did he live?"

"No, he died of a brain tumor. But, how could you possibly know about him? Everyone in Intensive Care is out cold with drugs."

"Not me. The nurse misread my chart. I received my shot every eight hours, not every three. I remember."

Each day Sarah's condition improved, and Bob dismissed the night and mid-shift nurses. Only Santee remained on duty. She'd greet Sarah each morning and as she bathed her, she'd tell Sarah facts about her own life. "My husband's a butcher; his white boss came to our door one night and I held out my hand to shake his and he looked stricken." Santee laughed and said, "I put my black hand on his white hand and said, it doesn't rub off." See, Sarah, I made you laugh. You're definitely getting better."

The pain medication was discontinued as Sarah's condition improved. When her mind was finally cleared of drugs, she no longer hallucinated.

"Santee, how many days have I been in the hospital?"

“Twenty-four, counting today.”

“How old are you, Santee?”

“Twenty-two. You're my first patient since I graduated from nurse's training.”

Santee chuckled and added, “See why I couldn't let you up and die on me? I've got a clean record.”

“You're a wonderful nurse. You care. You saved my life. Don't get hard like some of those other nurses.”

“They've seen too much death. They turn cold protecting themselves. I'd quit before I'd be like them.”

Day after day, the bond between Sarah and Santee strengthened. They talked to each other like old friends, with an honesty between them that Sarah had rarely experienced.

“Sarah, lots of the things you said I didn't understand. Like about snakes and a farmer.”

“When I was a child, I had nightmares about snakes.”

“Well, Honey Chile, ya sure looks like a little girl, all seventy-eight pounds of you. How's you like my deep south accent?”

“I like the way you talk, no matter what your accent. When I was out of my gourd, your sweet voice comforted me. A dream voice would bellow, 'HURRY,' and you'd wipe my head and say, 'It's okay, you're safe. I'm here with you.' I really love you, Santee. I'll never, ever forget you.”

Santee's even white teeth gleamed against her dark skin as she grinned and said, “There's something I'd like to ask you. When your nice husband would show up so handsome and smelling sweet from aftershave, so loving and concerned; I'd think, how could Sarah cheat on him?”

“Cheat on him? I've never cheated on him.”

Listening to your dreams that's what I thought. Now I think you were racing with death.”

When Bob arrived for his evening visit, he smiled and said, “Hey, Honey, you're starting to look better. God, what a day I had. The office was packed. The phones were ringing off the wall. And your mother — if she doesn't stop calling me three times a day, I'm going to blow my top.”

Bob kicked the bottles under the bed as he bent to kiss Sarah good-bye and she screamed, “God damn it, Bob, you kicked those bottles again.”

“You must be getting better,” Bob laughed. “You're feisty as hell tonight.”

“You bet I am. I'm sick of being poked and prodded. My arms have so many needle marks, the cops will think I'm a junkie. I'm sick of thermometers being poked up my ass. I'll bet that S.O.B. Steiner fucked up my operation on purpose.”

In the morning when the surgical team made its rounds, Sarah was alert. Dr. Miller, the chief resident, was irritable as usual. He inspected Sarah's stitches and roughly fingered her scar. She winced from pain, and Dr. Miller chided, “It can't hurt that much.” He concentrated on Sarah's abdomen and avoided her eyes. Sarah had known Dr. Miller disliked her, but now she knew why. Intuitively, she *knew* he was the man who had sewn the six stitches into her urethra. She *knew* Dr. Steiner must have said, “I'm finished. Miller, sew her up.” Sarah's very existence made him feel guilty.

Three weeks after the second surgery the crib sides of Sarah's hospital bed were down, and she could walk to the bathroom. Santee sat Sarah on the toilet, placed the bottles attached to her on the floor, and quietly closed the bathroom door on her way out.

Sarah grunted and groaned and bit her lip until it bled. She held the palms of her hands on her behind with such strength that the full impact of her fingers remained, black and blue reminders of the agony she'd suffered in the last month.

Santee unwrapped the bandages from Sarah's abdomen and genitals and cranked Sarah's bed to a sitting position. Sarah, nude from the waist down, clamped her eyes tight. She felt humiliated and shamed as the photographer, who had been waiting in the hall, entered her room.

As flash bulbs popped and illuminated the raw, red scars that knifed from Sarah's belly button to pubis, she leaned back into the raised bed, her arm over her face, and held her breath. She felt disgraced. The photographer said, "I'm sorry to put you through this. I'm finished now. Good-bye."

"Thank you, good-bye," Sarah said without removing her arm from her eyes, her face flushed with embarrassment.

Later when the photographs were developed Bob showed them to Sarah and he said, "They're great, Honey. We'll definitely win the malpractice suit. You'll see, all your pain won't be in vain."

Sarah hadn't looked into a mirror for over a month, and her appearance in the print horrified her. She looked like a concentration camp victim. Red rubber pincers held her stitches, and tubes penetrated from her stomach. She barely recognized this apparition. She felt old and ugly. "Couldn't those pictures have waited until I got home from the hospital and gained a little weight?"

"No. Every day you look better, and I wanted those pictures taken before your stitches were removed. Those red pinchers that hold them and the tubes in your stomach tell the whole story; seeing these prints the jury will be more sympathetic. I want to win a good settlement for you."

"I don't care about money or possessions. All the money in the world couldn't compensate for what I experienced. On the other hand, I've learned a lot; now I understand what's important, and it's not money. It's health and time. Time is precious; it can't be bought or sold. No one is exempt from pain the rich suffer and die just like the poor. Living, no one can experience the peace and joy that death brings."

"What in hell are you talking about, Sarah?"

"Remember, I told you I almost died. It happened a couple of days ago, or was it last week? I'm not sure about time, yet, but I clearly remember floating up to the ceiling. I looked down and saw my body on the bed. You were standing on one side and Santee on the other. I floated upward out of the room to the open sky, and my father stretched

out his hand to me. He said, 'Come on, Baby. This won't hurt. Take my hand.' I felt at peace; with a tranquility and joy I'd never experienced before. I longed to take my father's hand, his forefinger was only an inch away from mine, like Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel. I accepted death and I wanted to die. Then I heard your sobs and looked down. You were standing next to the bed and weeping. I thought, the poor bastard's never going to make it without me. I'd better stick around.'

"I'll never fear death again, so now, maybe, I can stop fearing life. I'll probably be terrified of pain for the rest of my days, but not of death. I want my health and your love. Knowing you needed me saved my life and you know what they say about someone who saves your life," Sarah chuckled, "you're responsible for me forever."

More than a month after Sarah had entered the hospital, she was wheeled down to the x-ray department. An aide helped her onto the examining table and Dr. Miller said, "You will have to lie perfectly still until this test is over."

The resident still avoided looking Sarah in the eye. Her body remained inert, but she turned her head to the right and watched the doctor remove a yellowed tube from the bottle attached to her. He pumped red dye and chemicals into his end of the tube and then attached it to a machine. He pushed a button and dye coursed through the tube into Sarah's right kidney.

She didn't flinch or move a muscle, but kept her head turned toward Dr. Miller. "Why don't you ever look me in the eye?" she asked.

Dr. Miller remained silent. He kept his eyes glued to the kidney machine or stared off into space.

"Damn it, Dr. Miller, look at me! I'm a person, not just a name on my wrist. You've never even said my name."

Sarah's body was immobile, but she talked rapidly. "This pain is nothing. I've had *real* tragedy in my life. My father was murdered when I was twenty-two and my mother had a nervous breakdown shortly thereafter. She's having one right now in my

room. I had a hysterectomy when I was twenty-nine. Dr. Steiner bungled that operation, too. I love children, and I won't ever be pregnant again."

The Resident continued monitoring the kidney machine and didn't acknowledge Sarah's presence or anything she said.

"Damn you. I don't care if you like me or not. But you listen to me when I'm talking to you. I'm a person. I'm a Catholic. I'm a Jew. I don't know who the hell I am. I'm a survivor. I survived you bungling my operation. I know you're the one who sewed six stitches into my urethra. Look at me, damn you! Listen! Maybe you can learn something and not bungle someone else's surgery.

"I'm alive, no thanks to you. Look at me! *I'm not just body parts and urine specimens.* I'm an artist. I'll create something from this experience. You'll see. All my suffering won't be in vain. I want these tubes and pincers when they're removed. I'll make art out of them."

By the end of the second hour, Sarah's voice was hoarse when Dr. Miller finally spoke. "The test is over. The orderly will take you back to your room now." The doctor and orderly had to bend Sarah into a sitting position and ease her back into a wheelchair.

On the elevator Sarah pleaded with the orderly. "Please, please check my room before you wheel me in. If there's a woman sitting near my bed staring at the wall, it's my mother. I won't return to my room unless you tell her to leave. I can't stand one more minute being trapped in that bed with my mother staring at me, not saying one word."

Elizabeth was gone when the orderly helped Sarah back into bed. She lay in bed staring at the ceiling, her mind as numb as her body. When an aide stopped in to fill her water glass, Sarah asked to have her bed elevated. When the aide left, she pulled the phone closer and dialed her grandmother's number.

When Etta answered the phone, Sarah said, "Grandma, my mother is having another nervous breakdown. I'm still in the hospital and too weak to take care of her this time. Please call her doctor. I'm sorry, grandma. Please take care of her."

Sarah slumped back against the pillows and didn't speak for the rest of the day, grateful she had no visitors, not even Bob.

The following morning, Dr. Miller entered Sarah's room, a grin across his face as he said, "Good morning, Sarah. The Russians just invaded Czechoslovakia." Sarah knew then that he had listened to her. Dr. Miller's hands were gentle as he examined her scars.

Dr. Steiner, who hadn't stopped in to see Sarah since the second operation, now walked in looking sheepish. "Your kidney is functioning perfectly, but we'll have to monitor it here in the hospital for a few more days."

"So I'll stay a few more days, but you've got to ban my mother from this room. She's driving me crazy. She sits next to my bed and stares at me. My sons left for college. There's no one I want to see, except Bob."

"Okay, Sarah. I can do that for you. I'll ban all visitors except your husband."

Elizabeth, banned from her daughter's room, drove Bob crazy with repeated calls, "What do you mean I can't visit my own daughter? I paid for the nurses."

Santee nibbled off of Sarah's lunch tray, saying, "God, if I'm caught, there'll be hell to pay."

"Don't worry. If someone comes in, just stick the spoon in my mouth and I'll pretend I'm chewing, and you stop chewing."

They looked at each other and laughed. "You're a riot. I wish I'd written down some of the things you said while you were hallucinating. I'd write me a bestseller and be rich like you."

"Where did you get the idea I'm rich? I'm not rich."

"Well, your husband is always dressed in expensive suits when he comes to visit and you've received so many beautiful gifts and flowers. Come to think of it, you've never acted uppity."

"Uppity? God. Someday I'll have to tell you about my life."

Santee grinned, laughed, and said, “Honey, I’ve listened to you talk for way over a month, I don’t think there’s much you haven’t told me. Some things you said were clear and some were confused, but you never stopped talking. You told me about your father’s death and about the King march. You kept mumbling about a farm, about how butter and cottage cheese are made. Then you’d whine and cry. Did something happen to you on a farm?”

“I don’t know. Did I talk a lot?”

“Talking! Sweet girl, you never stopped. You kept me entertained full.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Shallot. I’m Dr. Hefner. We haven’t met officially.” The doctor chuckled, “That is, I know your insides, but you don’t know me. Dr. Steiner called me in to operate on you. I’m a pediatric urologist.”

Sarah opened her eyes and turned her head toward the disembodied voice. Her eyes were unfocused, the doctor a blur.

“I hear you, Doctor, but I can’t seem to see you.”

“It’s all the drugs you’ve had. Don’t worry. Your husband tells me you’re the most honest woman he’s ever met. He said that if I told you the truth you’d cooperate.” Dr. Hefner chuckled again and added, “He also told me if I lied to you, there would be hell to pay.” The doctor turned and smiled at Bob standing next to him.

“I have good news and that’s the truth. The test confirmed that your kidney is functioning properly. The tubes in your stomach can be removed now.”

“Thank God.”

“Mrs. Shallot, I can give you something to ease the pain when I remove the tubes, but that would take twenty minutes to work and I’d have to come back to your room. I’m running late, way behind schedule, so would you allow me take the tubes out now?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Sarah’s eyes focused briefly and she looked at the tall, slender doctor in his expensive sports coat, the stethoscope dangling around his neck like a Lord Mayor’s medallion.

“Only one thing, Doctor,” she said, “send my husband out to the hall. He's a real chicken-shit.”

Bob stood in the corridor and heard Sarah's screams. When he returned to her bedside her eyes remained closed. After a quick nod to Bob, the doctor rushed off, probably to play golf.

Two days later Bob carried Sarah in his arms from the car to the house and tucked her into her own bed. “Now remember,” he said, “you can't get up except to use the bathroom. I'll stay home as much as possible, so just ask me if you want anything. Louise made dinner for us, and she'll drop it off later and say hi to you.”

Sarah was safe at home now or so she thought. Two weeks later her mother knocked on the front door and announced, “There are voices from outer space on the car radio.” Somehow Elizabeth had convinced Grandma Etta and Aunt Esther that she was well and that it was Sarah's delusion that she was ill. Elizabeth's full breakdown waited until Sarah came home.

CHAPTER 10

Bob looked at his wife propped up in their bed, two pillows behind her back; the décolleté of her fresh nightgown revealing nothing but protruding bones. She hadn't gained a pound since leaving the hospital the week before, and dark circles still ringed her eyes.

"I'm leaving now," Bob said. "I want to get to the hospital before visiting hours are over."

"Wait. Please wait. Come sit on the bed near me for a minute. I'll be alone for hours after you leave. Please."

"Okay. Just for a minute," Bob sighed, as he sat gingerly at the foot of the bed. Sarah's tubes were removed, but the sight of her still repulsed him.

Sarah reacted to Bob's grimace. "You must be sick to death of hospitals," she said. "First me, now your father."

"I am. I hate hospitals."

Black circles ringed Bob's eyes, too. His complexion looked pasty and mottled. A deep frown across his brows and the lines near his unsmiling mouth formed a double cross.

"You look exhausted. Why don't you stay home with me tonight? You've visited your father in the hospital every night since the day after I came home."

Bob twisted on the edge of the bed, his feet toward the bedroom door, his face toward Sarah. "I am exhausted," he said, "but what can I do?"

"Last night after you saw Dad, you said he was in fine spirits. You said he's making a faster recovery after his appendectomy than I am after my two operations. So, stay home with me tonight, and spend more time with Dad tomorrow night."

“God, I wish I could. I'd like to just crawl in bed beside you and never get up.”

Bob cracked his knuckles, sighed, and said in despair, “My father needs me, too.”

“Sure he does, Honey. But, every night?”

“I came to the hospital night and day for you. How can I do less for my father? He brightens up when I arrive. Last night his eyes had their old flash when I told him about the Benzinger case. He always gets a kick out of hearing how I beat the bejesus out of some schmuck for my client.”

“Dad's proud of his son, the lawyer. I am, too. Sometimes I think you are the only happiness in your father's life.”

Bob smiled momentarily, “Nah.” Then he sucked air into his nostrils and his chest heaved. “Sarah, I sat with him last night for three hours. I came so close to telling him I love him. But I didn't. I never have.”

“Tell him tonight. Tell him that I love him, too. He's been my father, for more years than I knew my own dad.”

“I will, if you ever let me out of here.” Bob stood, bent over and planted a rubbery kiss on Sarah's nose. He brushed invisible lint from his trouser leg, pinched the crease with his thumb and forefinger, and moved toward the door. “I have to leave now. Stay in bed while I'm gone.”

“Wait,” Sarah pleaded. “Please bring me a cup of tea before you leave. And paper and pencil. I'm not allowed to walk down the stairs and I'm not sleepy.”

“Yes, okay.” Bob's sigh almost choked him as he headed for the stairs. In the kitchen he filled the copper kettle with water and turned a flame under it. He cut a slice of the apricot pie Louise had dropped off earlier and sprinkled powdered sugar on top. He dragged out a wooden tray, and in his search for a linen towel to cover it, he left every cabinet and drawer open. The kettle whistled and he poured steaming water over the tea bag in a porcelain cup on the tray. He carried his offerings up the stairs like a butler doing service.

He laid the tray across Sarah's lap and blew a kiss in her direction. "Bye, Honey," he said as he turned to leave.

"Wait. I need paper and pencil."

"Okay, okay."

Bob brought the paper and pencil, the newspaper, the phone, and a cold glass of water. Then he exploded, "Damn it! I've got to leave!"

"I'm sorry," Sarah murmured. "Go ahead, leave now. Give Dad my love."

Four hours later she fidgeted in bed impatiently. She wondered what kept Bob; he was usually home from the hospital by ten or eleven. John's just an excuse, she thought, Bob can't stand the sight of me. He wants to stay away for as long as possible.

Easing herself out of bed, she walked the few steps to the bathroom. After she washed her hands at the sink, she looked at herself in the mirror and was horrified. No wonder Bob didn't want to be with her. She looked like a skeleton, bitterness written all over her face.

Sarah splashed cold water on her face, ran a brush through her hair, and again stared at her reflection. "Okay," she said aloud, "bitterness is making me look old so I'll have to give it up."

She eased herself back into bed and groaned as a remaining stitch pulled. Anxiety over Bob, his father, and her physical appearance kept her occupied for another hour.

Bob finally walked in the door two hours later. "You're so late. What kept you so long?" Then, noticing Bob's grief stricken face, she asked with concern, "What's wrong?"

"My father died tonight."

"Oh, God! No, no. Were you with him? Did you tell him we love him?"

"No. He died five minutes before I arrived."

"God. Oh, Bob, I'm so sorry. Truly I am."

Bob moved to the bed and Sarah reached up to him and he sank to his knees beside her. She cradled his head in her arms and together they wept.

Four weeks had passed since John's funeral and Elizabeth's hospitalization. Sarah dabbed perfume behind her ears and on her wrists. She applied makeup carefully, pulled a cream silk and lace nightgown over her head, brushed her hair in place, and climbed into bed. She looked at Bob for approval. He looked at her bony shoulders and flat décolleté and laughed, "You look like a clothes hanger, Sarah," and rejected her embrace.

"I know I'm skinny, but do I have to gain weight before you'll make love to me?"

"I can't make love to you, Sarah. You scare me."

"I what?"

"You scare me. You look so fragile, I'm afraid I'll hurt you. I need time to forget how you looked in Intensive Care with all those tubes coming out of you every which way."

Sarah covered her eyes with her hands and whimpered, "Do you still find me repulsive?"

Bob cracked his knuckles and stared at his hands, and in a voice so low Sarah had to strain to hear he said, "Yes."

Night after night, Sarah lay alone in her marriage bed listening to the crinkle of Bob's newspaper as he turned a page in the living room. She'd crawl out of bed, stand at the top of the stairs and call down to him softly, "Honey, it's late. Why don't you come up to bed?"

Bob's harsh NO! disallowed any further attempt, and Sarah crawled back into bed and cried herself to sleep.

Her first thought in the morning: "Bob doesn't want me anymore." Before her feet touched the floor, she'd be troubled by her mother's last phone call. Elizabeth, home from the hospital, had resumed her constant complaints and criticism. Elizabeth's personality remained the same, but not Bob's.

Six months after his father's death, Bob no longer polished briefs in his office on Saturdays. Saturdays were now reserved for polishing his new red, 1969 Jaguar. Washing his “baby” had become a ritual.

Bob, a workaholic, had become a playaholic, and a shopaholic. He spent his time and money on himself and screamed at Sarah, “Cut down on your expenses. I'm not made of money.”

Bob bought a new suit, and then another. He hid the fifth new suit in his office so Sarah wouldn't discover it. He bought shoes with straps and shoes with buckles, and he gave up his shoes with laces. He bought shirts with patterns and ties without. He bought rep ties and knotted ties, and even a bow tie. He spent three hundred dollars in Field's men's hosiery department, the same department where he'd inventoried the stock room in his undergraduate days.

He almost emptied the sports department at Abercrombie and Fitch. He bought a backpack, a thermos, a rope, a knife, hiking shoes, and sportsman's pants and shirts, though he'd never hiked before in his life. He acted out the loss of his father, without ever mentioning John's name. Now he hiked and played tennis in the summer. In the winter he took skiing lessons.

Sarah spent her time in the studio; she'd never been athletic. Bob didn't seem to miss her companionship the way she missed his.

After spending money for a year, Bob looked in his checkbook and screamed, “Stop spending my money, Sarah. There isn't any!”

But Bob continued his shopping sprees and he continued to rile Sarah on her purchases. “You bought three pair of hose! Couldn't you be satisfied with one?”

“They were on sale. I got three pair for the price of two.”

If Bob looked at Sarah at all, he complained that she was still far too skinny. She thought she looked slender, not skinny, and was pleased with the way her clothes fit. She was reluctant when Bob insisted she go to a new doctor to find out why she still weighed only 90 pounds.

After the doctor's appointment Bob grilled Sarah, “What did the doctor say? When are you going to gain weight?”

Giggling, Sarah replied, “I laid on the examining table completely nude under the sheet. The doctor came in, whipped off the sheet, stared at my naked body from head to toe and said, 'You look good to me. What's the matter with your husband?’”

Bob did not find Sarah's report humorous. He did, however, stop nagging about her weight and occasionally even patted her ass affectionately as she stood at the kitchen sink. He continued to buzz her dutifully on the lips before he left for work in the morning and again when he returned home in the evening.

After dinner, while Sarah cleaned the kitchen, he'd collapse face down on the sofa. After his nap, he'd jump to his feet and say, “I forgot something in the office,” or, “I have to attend a meeting,” or . . . , and he'd rush out of the house and be gone for hours. When he did come home, he smelled like a brewery. Occasionally he'd paw Sarah's sleeping body awake and nothing she could say would dissuade him from a “quickie.”

CHAPTER 11

Sarah firmly believed that sexual energy and creativity emanated from the same source. What she couldn't get in the bedroom, she gave to her art.

Hank, Sarah's friend and former classmate, was a frequent visitor in her studio. Today, after a brief greeting, he asked, "When are you going to get your act together? You're still a half-time artist and a full-time housewife."

Sarah's fingers tightened around her paintbrush as she stared at Hank. His freckled baby face and his blonde hair curling over his forehead made him appear even younger than his twenty-two years. He wasn't much older than the twins. How could he understand Sarah's problems?

"Look at this hodgepodge," Hank said, waving his arm around the conglomeration in Sarah's studio. He pointed his finger at one abstract painting after another, saying, "Pretty colors and no structure. Your new work is powerful, like poetry, and you won't show your assemblages to anyone outside this studio. What are you hiding from?" Hank Wilson, a philosophy major, never pulled punches when he shared his opinions. The depth of Hank's intellectual prowess was well beyond his years.

"I was a closet poet for years, Sarah. Then my father died, and I wrote a powerful poem about his death. I shared that poem with one friend; it was a risky move, but it paid off. My friend gave me good feedback, and I risked again and showed it to someone else. Now I'll show my poetry to anyone, and if they don't appreciate it, that's their problem."

"Your poetry is beautiful. How could you doubt that?"

"The same way you doubt yourself and your work. I thought you'd get serious when you dropped out of college. I hoped you'd see the light and stop *playing* at being an artist and *be* one."

“I want to be a serious artist, but it's hard to find time. I count myself lucky if I manage three uninterrupted mornings a week in here.”

“I know you had a rough time with your surgery, but you have plenty of energy now. Stop hiding your feelings behind decorative paintings and let yourself go. You're a lot stronger than you pretend to be.”

Sarah bristled and swallowed her anger as Hank walked to a box construction hanging on the wall. He stood in front of it and said; “Now this is beautiful, full of power and truth. Stop hiding this in your studio and enter it in a juried show.”

With fresh eyes, Sarah looked at the contents of the construction. An undressed Barbie doll hung upside down suspended from a hook. Toy baby bottle nipples swelled the doll's breasts and a Woolworth's diamond ring sparkled from the doll's crotch. Barbie hair curlers, shaped like miniature pink penises, dangled from a miniature bare-leaved tree glittering with gold sparkle.

“Hank! I couldn't show *this*! People would think I'm a dirty old lady.”

“Damn it, Sarah, you didn't design those hair curlers. They do look exactly like little pink penises—some smart ass designer thought he was getting away with something. No wonder Barbie dolls are so popular! You look like I insulted you, when what I've given you is a compliment for being so observant.”

“You think you know me, Hank, but you really don't. Not so many years ago, I walked out of a room if someone told a dirty joke.” Sarah turned her back to Hank, grabbed five paint-filled brushes, and walked to the sink.

Hank followed her, saying, “You're an incredible woman, with the drive and courage to pursue your art, but you're over forty—it is time you grew up! I know you think I'm being tough, but I respect you and your work, and you should too.”

Sarah scrubbed the last soapy paintbrush in her palm, rinsed all the brushes, and then shaped them. She laid the brushes on the sink counter and turned to Hank. “Something's lacking but I don't know what. I know I'm searching for something. I think of all kinds of questions, but I never come up with answers.”

“Don't be so hard on yourself. Most people never even think of the questions.”

Sarah squirted hand lotion into her palm and rubbed her hands together. “I've got to start dinner. Do you want to stay?”

“No, thanks anyway. The last time I stayed for dinner, Bob and I argued philosophy until 3:00 A.M.”

“I remember. I didn't contribute a thing, but I really enjoyed the discussion. What I don't understand is why you jumped to your feet at 3:00, looked at Bob, and said, 'If it were anyone but you, I wouldn't have even bothered.'”

“Bob's bright and witty, but I don't think he's read anything but law books since he left college. Jesuit philosophy went out years ago, and Bob still thinks he knows the exact number of angels on a pinhead. He speaks as if he had God's divine knowledge. He thinks he knows everything about everything. You mentioned questioning yourself, I don't think Bob questions himself at all. He's just drifted to the right with age. He could never treat you as an equal.”

The knot in Sarah's stomach tightened. “You're really giving me the works today,” she said.

“I'm prodding you because I know what you're capable of. Are you going to continue playing house, playing at art, and acting like a lady-of-the-manor? Or will you reveal yourself and produce a major work of art?”

“You don't understand. It's hard to concentrate on art when I have so many other obligations.” Sarah crossed her arms over her chest and said defiantly, “If I were a man, I wouldn't have to divide myself in two. I'd build a sculpture so big even the critics couldn't ignore it.”

“What do you mean, if you were a man? You, the closet feminist!”

“You got me again! Okay, I *am* going to build a sculpture so huge,

“And I'll help you. The first semester of my graduate program doesn't begin until October. We'll have the whole summer. My office job is a bore and working with you will be my exercise. What do you say?”

“Bob, I cashed in my life insurance—you know the policy my father paid on until he died. I'm using the money to create the largest sculpture anyone ever built. I've rented a barn and Hank's going to help me.”

“You what?”

“I rented a barn ten miles from here. I can't build a twenty-foot sculpture in my two-by-four studio. I have an idea; I'm going to build an apartment building constructed of cardboard boxes. Each box will be one apartment. One will have a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling reflecting a couple copulating on the sofa, another....”

“You are definitely nuts, Sarah. Totally crazy. I've supported your wild ideas in the past, but this is too much! It's your money, but don't ask or expect any help from me.”

“The King March wasn't so crazy. Now Vanderville has a Human Relations Commission. And the march didn't hurt your practice. You're busier than ever. I want to build this sculpture. I have plenty of energy now.” *Unused sexual energy*. “I'm going to build this sculpture with or without you.”

Five nights a week Hank joined the Shallots at the dinner table, then he and Sarah worked in the barn until one or two in the morning. On weekends they worked on the sculpture all day. One humid night in July, as they drove to the barn, Sarah confided, “This sculpture is going to change our lives. I don't know how, but it will. You'll be changed first, you're young. My changes will take longer.”

The twins, home from college for the summer, pitched in at the barn when their schedules permitted. Former classmates heard about Sarah's project and stopped in from time to time to lend a hand. Strangers driving by at night saw the lights in the barn and stopped to investigate. One man looked at Hank and said, “You're so young to be creating such a gigantic sculpture.”

“I'm not the artist, she is,” Hank replied, as he pointed to Sarah, who stood on a six-foot ladder adding glitter to the inside of a box.

Sarah had stopped making beds and cleaning toilets, but she continued cooking dinner every night. No matter what she cooked, Bob complained. He complained about everything. He didn't argue with her, however, when she refused to stop work to have dinner with the Devlins.

“Go without me,” she said. “I've only met them once, but I can't stand either one of them. They're both weird.”

The night Bob had dinner with the couple; he was still out when Sarah returned from the barn at 1:30 A.M. She fell into an exhausted sleep and was awakened around 3:00 A.M. by drunken laughter cascading up the stairs to their bedroom. She listened to a woman simper, “Meow, Bob, meow,” while a man grumbled and pleaded, “C'mon, Lorraine, it's time to go home.”

“Meow, Bob. Meow.”

“WE'RE GOING HOME. LORRAINE! NOW!”

In the morning, Sarah confronted Bob while they dressed for mass. “Your drunken friends woke me up. I told you Lorraine was an ass. I was wrong, she's a cat. A crazy cat at that. 'Meow, Bob. Meow,'” Sarah mimicked. “Thank God, I had the brains to work in the barn instead of going out for dinner with those jerks. I would have been bored out of my mind with that simpering woman.”

Bob didn't mention the Devlins again, and another month of work in the barn passed. Early one muggy August morning, Bob was reading *Playboy* in bed when Sarah arrived home at 2:00. He watched her undress and chided, “Why the hell don't you wear bikinis? You're skinny enough. I hate your school-girl white cotton panties.” Humiliated, Sarah pulled up her jeans and retreated to the bathroom to change into her nightgown.

Periodically Sarah asked Bob where he spent his time—several nights a week he wasn't home when she returned from the barn. He excused his late hours with a variety of explanations. His alibis worked until the night Sarah stayed away from the barn and prepared a lavish dinner. The next day Sarah complained to Louise.

“You know, Bob's been acting weird, coming home at all hours, smelling like a brewery. Well, last night takes the cake. He's been bitching about me spending every night working in the barn, so I told him I'd stay home and fix a special dinner just for the two of us. The twins had dates, and I told him we'd have the whole house to ourselves. Hank appreciated the night off, too. We both needed a break.

“I set the table with the good china and silver, had the candles lit, and was expecting Bob at any minute, when the phone rang. It was Bob calling from the Randolph Street station to say he'd missed his train. I blew out the candles, turned the gas off under the pots, and sat in the living room stewing over my ruined dinner.

“Two hours later, he called again, drunk as a skunk, to say he'd missed another train. I was furious. 'You can miss one train, but not two!' He shouted back, 'Okay, if you act like a shrew, I'm not coming home at all.'“

Sarah's tears started and she blew her nose. “And, Lou, he didn't come home until eight this morning. He shaved, changed his clothes, and left for the office without one word of explanation. I tried to ask him but he just screamed and told me to shut up. I know this sounds crazy, but do you think Bob's having an affair?”

“C'mon Sarah, we both know he's a good man. I'll admit he's been acting goofy since Dad died, but he'd never cheat—he's a good Catholic. Maybe he's punishing you for spending so much time at the barn. You should forget about that sculpture. Just stop work on it and stay home.”

“I can't do that. I've never completed anything important in my whole life. Not college... not ... besides, Hank's put in a lot of time and energy. I can't let him down after all the help he's given me. I can't stop. I won't. Finishing this sculpture is very important to me. Besides, as you say, Bob would never cheat. My imagination is just out of control. He's probably still grieving over John's death and that's why he's drinking too much.”

Sarah continued to deny the meaning behind Bob's erratic behavior. By fall, her hours at the barn increased as she tried to complete the sculpture before Hank left for the

University of Wisconsin. She'd known Hank since his freshman year, and now he would begin his master's program while she remained a perennial junior. She consoled herself that while she might never have a college degree, she was creating one hell of a sculpture.

As work neared completion, Bob surprised Sarah one Sunday afternoon. He walked into the barn carrying a picnic basket and two bottles of champagne. Father Mike followed and was a further surprise.

Father Mike, back in the parish for a visit, strummed his guitar and sang Simon and Garfunkel hits while Hank dragged two sawhorses to the barn entrance. The twins laid a wide board across them and Sarah cut a long strip of white shelf paper for a tablecloth. She arranged wild flowers in a paint jug for a centerpiece and the gourmet lunch Bob had prepared was arranged on the makeshift table. The crew—Sarah, Hank, Josh, and Johnny—and the guests—Bob and Father Mike—pulled crates around the table and sat down to the feast. Champagne corks popped and everybody cracked jokes, horse-laughing at things that weren't even funny. Bob had provided crystal champagne glasses and they were lifted in one toast after another. Bob toasted Father Mike's music. Father Mike toasted Bob's salad niçoise and stuffed grape leaves. John toasted Hank's carpentry, and Hank toasted the twins' humor. Sarah toasted everyone, saying, "Thank you. Thank you all. What a wonderful celebration. I couldn't have done any of this without your help and support." Everyone toasted Sarah's talent and asked in one voice, "So when will the sculpture be finished?" When the celebration ended, everyone pitched in and worked on the sculpture—even Bob.

A week later, the sculpture complete, Hank measured the dimensions—twenty feet high, sixteen feet wide, and ten feet deep. The gigantic sculpture contained thirty boxes, ten boxes high, with double-sized boxes on the ground level. Hank and Sarah stood in the barn entrance as they proudly surveyed their accomplishment. Spontaneously, Hank lifted Sarah off her feet and swung her full circle. "You did it! You did it!"

"We did it, Hank! I wouldn't have had the guts to even begin without you."

Sarah, back on her feet, grinned as Hank said, “It really does look like an apartment house with those curtained windows, dirty windows, and windows that sparkle. Where did you ever get the idea to have shops on the lower level?”

Sarah looked at the bakery window filled with ceramic bread and pastry. She looked at the butcher shop next door and the collaged signs in the window—Hamburger 25 cents per pound, Soup bones FREE. She looked at the window of the boutique, the miniature mannequin inside dressed in a white satin wedding dress, a jeweled tiara on its wigged head. The front of a toy antique fire truck poked out of a fire station and miniature firemen and their hoses completed the tableau.

Sarah let out a whoop, “Until this minute I never realized I'd created a replica of my grandfather's European style building. In Europe, all the store proprietors and their families lived above their stores. When I was a little girl we lived in my grandfather's building, in an apartment above the butcher shop. The firemen in the station next door, played with me. One let me sit in the fire truck and turn the wheel. Another held me in his arms while we slid down the fire pole. I thought I was the luckiest four-year-old on the block 'cause I had firemen for friends. Then they stopped talking to me.” A wave of sadness wiped away Sarah's smile.

“Why'd they stop?”

“I don't know.” Sarah hesitated then said, “Wait a minute, I think I do. The firemen were sitting in front of the station laughing and ignoring me, and I asked my favorite why he wouldn't play with me anymore. He looked sad when he replied, 'Your mother told me we can't talk to you.' Now I remember, my mother screamed at those firemen, she called them dirty, bad men. She sure over-protected me. Those firemen were so kind.”

Sarah shivered and wondered why she felt sad. Only a minute before she'd been happy. She pasted a smile back on her face and said, “I just had an inspiration. Grandpa's building had a carved granite sign on top with his name and the date the

building was completed. Before I leave today, I'm going to paint a sign that reads, Sarah Shallot, 1970. I'll hang it above the top set of windows.”

Sarah arranged through a friend of a friend to have the *Chicago Sun Times* art critic view the sculpture in the barn before it was dismantled. The enthralled critic said he'd arrange for the sculpture to be shown at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

On opening night, Chicago newspaper photographers followed Sarah around the exhibition, snapping her picture as if she were a celebrity. A *Trib* reporter asked her to find a quiet spot in a back room so he could interview her. “What will you be doing next, Ms. Shallot?” he asked.

“I don't know. I'll have to read. Think.”

When the reporter left, Sarah sat alone feeling exhausted and wondered why she felt alienated and sad rather than exuberant with her sudden fame.

Johnny found his mother hiding in the back room away from the crowds viewing the sculpture. “Ma,” he said, “if you tell me, after all this, that it's nothing, I won't even have the guts to try.”

“It's all great, John,” Sarah assured her son, but inside she felt like a phony, despite her accomplishment. She felt more relief than pride.

Bob prepared all the food for the home celebration after the successful opening. He'd hired a Dixieland band and he played congenial host. As Lorraine Devlin followed him from room to room, Sarah wondered why Bob had insisted on inviting the Devlins. Sarah's friends swarmed around her in the smoke-filled rec room. They congratulated her on her achievement, but she felt like a fraud. If she could do it, anyone could.

In the days that followed, Sarah had mixed feelings as she read the newspapers, pleased that her work had received favorable reviews, yet thought it was luck, not talent, that brought her attention. The *Hammond Times* printed a full-page color photograph of the sculpture—the first time the *Times* had used color in a weekday edition. Sarah was interviewed on radio and TV. A segment of the CBS-TV news was devoted to the “apartment sculpture.” Sarah began to feel worthy of the attention. Now, if she died

tomorrow, the papers would write about her accomplishment, rather than rehash her father's death.

Sarah, Hank, and the twins dismantled the sculpture after it had been on view for two weeks. They stored the sculpture in a double garage Sarah had rented, and the following day the twins left for college, Hank left for Wisconsin, and Sarah spent the day in bed recovering from all the work and excitement.

By the end of October Sarah had caught up with all the housework she'd neglected. "I'm lonely," she told Bob when she caught up with him. "You're never home, and the twins rarely call."

Another month passed, and Sarah, bored with the monotony of her post-sculpture days, missed the feeling of purpose. Each morning for months she'd jumped out of bed, donned her hard hat (to protect her hair from bird droppings in the barn), and rushed to work. Now she felt as empty as the house.

She stayed in bed later every morning and again she questioned the meaning of life. Six months before, she'd been the toast of the town; now she was just another tired housewife with no one to care for. She no longer spent hours in her studio; since the apartment sculpture she hadn't been able to create anything. A work-block was a new phenomenon. Sarah felt lost without a goal. Work was the only activity that gave her pleasure.

Once again she spent more time in doctor's waiting rooms than she had in the barn. Her anxieties and Bob's late hours produced an early-morning ulcer attack and Bob rushed her to the hospital emergency room for a pain shot. She spent the next two days in bed. On the third day, Bob arrived home earlier than usual with a brightly wrapped package and handed it to Sarah as she lay propped up in bed. "What's this?" Sarah asked, her eyes bright with anticipation.

"Well, don't just hold the box, open it and see."

She gently pulled off the red satin ribbon and bow and then eagerly tore at the wrapping paper. Gently she unfolded the white tissue paper inside and lifted out a black

crepe spaghetti- strapped dress. She stared at the black sequined bodice and thought, what B-girl is this for? “What a wonderful surprise,” she said, feigning delight. She slipped out of bed and stood on tiptoe to kiss Bob's cheek. “Thanks so much, Honey.”

“Try it on.”

“I can't. I'm a mess, no makeup, and my ulcer's gnawing.”

“You don't like it,” Bob pouted, as he urged her once more to try on the dress.

“Okay, I'll put it on. But you'll have to visualize what I'll look like with makeup and my hair fixed.”

“I will. Now put on the dress.”

Sarah stepped out of her flannel pajamas as Bob asked, “How much do you weigh now?”

“Ninety-four pounds.”

“You've gained weight, Sarah, but it sure doesn't show. You're as skinny as ever. You're getting flabby, too, from spending so much time in bed. Why don't you use my exercise bar?” Bob flexed his biceps, bragging, “See what exercise has done for me?”

Sarah hated Bob's exercise bar. She hated listening to him grunt and groan at the foot of the bed every morning as he rolled the bar back and forth along the carpeting. The squeaks of the bar sounded like creaking bedsprings and sent shivers through her.

“The next time you go to the doctor, Sarah, ask him for something to help you gain weight. You look shriveled.”

Crushed by Bob's words she slipped the dress over her head and turned her back to Bob. “Please zip me up,” she said.

Zipped, she turned and stood in bare feet, lifting the hem of the dress so it wouldn't drag on the floor. Looking at Bob for approval, she knew from his expression he wasn't pleased with her appearance. “What's wrong?”

“You're too flat on top. Put on your falsies.”

Sarah dug a black lace-trimmed bra from her dresser drawer and almost tripped on the drooping hem as she carried the bra into the bathroom. She pulled out the foam

rubber inserts, slipped them into the bodice of her dress, and returned to the bedroom. She posed in front of her husband with her chest thrust out and standing on tip-toe the dress still dragged on the carpet.

“Turn around a few times,” Bob said. Sarah complied.

“That's more like it. Now you fill out the top. I bought you this dress so we could go dancing.”

“Dancing? You hate to dance.”

Bob, inconsistent as ever, said, “Well, I have another surprise for you. I've made reservations at the Wisconsin *Playboy Club* for this weekend. I like you better when you're gay and light-hearted. So, get packed and day after tomorrow we'll be on our way. It'll be like old times.”

The ride to Wisconsin was uneventful, even somewhat pleasant. Sarah's ulcer pain had subsided, and she enjoyed the first signs of spring. She wondered why she didn't believe Bob when he said their marriage was perfect?

The return trip held no pleasure. Bob's voice had resonance and timber, and in the closed car on a drizzling day, his roar of outrage bounced off the windows when the crossing gates closed and barely missed the front of his Jaguar. Twenty freight cars and the caboose passed, and then reversed the whole procedure as Bob beat his fist on the steering wheel and swore in frustration. “Son of a bitch,” he bellowed, while Sarah tried and failed to memorize the numbers on the freight cars as they passed.

Irritated by Bob's anger and impatience, Sarah raised her voice and snapped, “Damn it, Bob, we have to wait, so stop screaming about it.”

Bob's face contorted like a flamed red gargoyle as he waved his finger under Sarah's nose and hissed, “Bitch. I'm so sick of you.”

Bob's words throbbed in her ears as she left the car and retched on the gravel at the side of the road. Drizzle showered her face and hair.

The crossing gates went up. The cars lined up behind the Jaguar honked as Bob opened the car door and ordered, “Get in.”

Sarah sat as far away from Bob as possible. She pressed her head against the car window, tears dripped onto her pale-yellow sweater as she sucked on resentment.

“Sarah, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t sound sorry to me.”

The remaining hours of the trip home were a deafening silence.

The following Saturday night, Bob and Sarah were propped up in bed reading. What a rarity, both of them in bed at the same time. Bob concentrated on *Time* magazine, and Sarah read a monograph on Kurt Schwitters. She held her place with her finger when Bob interrupted, “You’ve given up a lot for your art, Sarah, but so have I,” he said. “Do you really want a career more than love?”

“A career won’t keep my feet warm in bed. Of course, your love is more important to me than a career. Are you still angry at me for spending so much time at the barn?”

“You have a short memory, Sarah. You’ve forgotten how supportive I was. I admit I didn’t go for your idea at the beginning, but I ended up preparing that lunch and bringing it out to the barn. I paid for the after opening party and the musicians. I . . .”

“I’ve thanked you for all that, Bob. Many times. I’ve told you how much I appreciated you, but you still sound angry to me. Are you going to be angry when I go to Oxbow this summer?”

“No. In fact, why don’t you go to that art school in North Carolina I read about. Yes, go to Penland, and for three weeks rather than your usual one.”

“Three weeks! That would be wonderful! At Penland I could get over my work-block.” She laid her book on the floor, then pressed her lips to Bob’s as she tried to curl up in his arms. “You’re so good to me, Honey,” she purred.

“No, Sarah,” Bob said, as he pulled away. “Not tonight.”

CHAPTER 12

Another hot August. Perspiration soaked Sarah's sleeveless blouse and vegetable steam sogged her lacquered hair into sticky gum. "Damn," she muttered, "Bob sits in his air-conditioned office all day. He doesn't realize how miserable it is in this kitchen." She opened the oven door to baste the chicken and more heat blasted her face. Why was she baking on a hot day like this? She remembered a comment her father made: "Once your mother decides to roast chicken—it could be the hottest day of the year—she roasts it." Bob said she was getting more like her mother every day.

Sarah stood in the kitchen with the bronze-colored stove, self-defrosting refrigerator, and the built-in dishwasher that hadn't worked for over a year. Copper pots and pans gleamed from a brass hook suspended from the ceiling. They were Bob's pots and pans; Sarah couldn't reach them. Her practical Teflon pots were stored in a cabinet beneath the sink. On an open shelf above the wooden chopping block, pots of ivy and philodendron wilted in the heat, and Sarah filled a water glass to refresh the plants. She'd only been home from Penland for a month, and already she was trapped in the old routine. At Penland she'd felt so young and free. There the men and the women pitched in to serve food and clean up after eating. If Bob ever scraped his own dinner plate, she'd die of shock.

An hour later, Bob blew in the front door, complaining, "Damn it, why are you baking on a day like this? This house feels like a blast furnace."

Sarah served dinner, and it was eaten without complaint or comment. After the meal, she scraped the plates and buried her hands and the dishes in hot sudsy water and stared at the blank white wall above the sink. She'd give anything for a view. She'd stared at blank walls most of her life. Above her head, a faceless clock recorded time. The clock's brass hands, pinioned to the white wall, had moved in silence for fourteen

years. Sarah stepped back from the sink, glanced up to check the time and discovered the clock had stopped. When? This afternoon? Yesterday? Last week?

Bob called to her from the living room where he sat reading the newspaper. She wiped her hands on a towel as she trotted the few steps and asked, "What is it?"

"I've been watching you do the dishes. How long has the dishwasher been broken?"

"Over a year. Why?"

"Well, I've been sitting in here watching you brush your hair off your forehead with your arm and you're always complaining about the heat in the kitchen, so, tomorrow buy a new dishwasher. I'm still short of money, but what the hell."

Sarah dropped the dish towel as she bent over to hug Bob and brush her lips against his cheek. "You're so good to me, Honey. Thanks a lot," she said before returning to the kitchen.

Her hands plunged deep in suds again, her thoughts still racing. Tomorrow she'd definitely order a new dishwasher.

A new dishwasher, that would be nice. It was even nicer at Penland when Sarah didn't have to wash any dishes or cook any meals. She wished she were back in North Carolina right now. She missed Peggy and wondered about her. By next month Peggy would start her senior year at Purdue. When they'd met at Penland, Sarah thought they'd have nothing in common. Peggy looked like a sixteen-year-old farm girl.

Peggy leaned her blonde rubber-banded ponytail against the wall and sprawled across the foot of Sarah's bed. Sarah's Penland room looked like her dorm room at Monticello. She felt like a young college student as she offered Peggy a plastic bag filled with chocolate-chip cookies. "They're homemade. Help yourself."

"You sure are domestic, Sarah, baking cookies to bring to Penland." Peggy bit into her cookie and asked, "Have you ever had a lover?"

Sarah choked on her cookie. "Well, yes, my husband."

Peggy giggled, "You've got to be kidding."

Sarah felt the generation gap, and reminded herself that she was old enough to be Peggy's mother. Clutching her half-eaten cookie, she asked hesitantly, "Have you? Have you had a lover?"

"Of course."

Sarah marveled at the young woman's composure as she confided her secrets. Peggy's face revealed no embarrassment, no emotion at all. Sarah, ill-at-ease, said in dismay, "Peggy, you've had a lover and you're not even married."

"My God, Sarah, are you ever naïve. I'm single and twenty-two. Of course I've had lovers."

"Lovers! You mean more than one?"

"Sure."

"My God, Peggy. Lovers! Just how many men have you slept with?" Sarah stammered, "Are men, uh, well, I mean . . . are men different in bed? I've only known one man in my life . . . that way."

"Sure, they're different. I've slept with twelve of them. One shouts his orgasm; one cries his; and once in a while, they can't get it up at all if they've had too much to drink."

Sarah's eyes widened as Peggy described the details of her finest lover: "He liked oral sex. God, that man kissed like an angel. He's the one who got me pregnant. I had an abortion last year."

"My God!"

"What?"

"Well, you've had so much experience and none of it shows in your face."

"You may look thirty-three, Sarah, but your ideas about sex are from the last century. You really think I'm a tramp because I've slept with twelve men? Most single women my age have slept with more. As for my sex life showing on my face, I stopped worrying about that when I was seventeen and screwed for the first time." Peggy laughed

as she told Sarah how she'd stood in front of the bathroom mirror staring at her face. "I was afraid to leave the bathroom. I was sure everyone would recognize I'd lost my innocence. Liquor changes features, Sarah, not sex."

"Peggy, don't you think having sex with so many men is wrong?"

"What do you mean, wrong?"

"Well, I'm Catholic and"

"For Christ's sake, Sarah, grow up! This is 1971. We've got the pill and the bomb, Woodstock and the Beatles. Haven't you ever left your family before?"

"Sure. For the last seven summers, I've spent one week at Oxbow in Michigan."

"Well, what did you think all those couples walking in the woods were doing? Looking for night flowers?"

Sarah covered her open mouth with her hand as recognition dawned. Then she blurted, "Peggy, at the rate you're going, you'll have slept with a hundred men by the time you're my age."

"If they're lucky!" Peggy chuckled and then asked, "Just how old are you, Sarah?"

"I've celebrated the first anniversary of my fortieth birthday."

"Why don't you just say you're forty-one?"

Sarah, more bewildered than ever, stared at Peggy, "I thought my answer was funny."

"You're just trying to hide your age."

"Okay, I'm forty-one and I've only known one man sexually in my entire life. I admit, sometimes I do wonder what it would be like to know another. I'd never consider cheating, of course; but, do you think I'm too old to ever have another lover?"

Peggy slid off the bed in slow motion. When she reached the floor, she rested her head on her bent knees, folded her arms behind her head, and rocked back and forth in hysterical laughter, tears in her eyes, her nose running, her body shaking. When she finally stopped laughing, she looked up at Sarah's chagrined expression and said, "Sarah,

I really like you. You're a terrific person and a fantastic artist. But, at heart, you're a Midwest housewife. This is the first time since we met that I've felt the generation gap.”

Sarah rinsed another glass under hot water and had begun soaking the pots and pans when Bob, reeking of aftershave, came up beside her at the sink. “I thought you were staying home tonight?” she said without looking at him.

“I forgot to tell you. They're having an extra session of the bank board of directors this month. I'll be late, so don't wait up.” He pecked her cheek and said, “Bye” as he rushed out the front door.

Sarah ran her finger tips over her cheek where Bob had kissed her and tried to remember the last time he'd kissed on the lips. She was amazed that she couldn't remember.

Her thoughts returned to Peggy as she laid the dish cloth over the rim of the double sink. Sarah wondered again if she would ever know another man—sexually. She felt crazy and knew she'd have to go to confession on Friday to reveal her impure thoughts. At 10:30 P.M., Sarah sat up in bed reading and waiting. Waiting for something. She twitched as the phone broke the silence and reached to answer it on the first ring.

“Mrs. Shallot, is your husband at home?”

“No, I'm sorry, he's not. He's at a meeting.” Sarah twisted the phone cord between her fingers wondering why this man was calling so late. “Who's calling, please?” she asked. “May I take a message?”

“Mrs. Shallot, I have a message for you. Your husband is not at a meeting. He's at the Holiday Inn with my wife.”

“Who is this?” Sarah asked with annoyance and then recognized the voice before the man responded. Jesus, it was Mr. Meow.

“This is Fred Devlin, Mrs. Shallot. I...”

Mr. Meow—he's as crazy as his wife. He's a wimp. The night Sarah met him Lorraine humiliated her husband by demanding all his credit cards and he didn't say a

word. He did rebuke her when she called the waiter a nigger, but he didn't respond when she snarled "Shut-up." No wonder Sarah refused to go out to dinner with the Devlin's a second time.

"Mrs. Shallot, your husband and my wife have been having an affair for over a year. Two months ago, I caught them together and confronted Bob. I . . ."

Sarah hadn't seen this man since her opening night party. His wife's a stupid cow. Lorraine's a slut. Bob wouldn't...

"I have proof, Mrs. Shallot. I have piles of your husband's letters to my wife."

He's nuts, definitely nuts. Bob doesn't have time to write letters. He never even writes to his sons. This man is crazy.

"Believe me, Mrs. Shallot. I'm telling you the truth. I found your husband with his pants down . . ."

Pants down. Elizabeth caught Bart with *his* pants down. *Bart and Madeline*. No... No ... Sarah's thoughts drifted in and out as she half listened to Fred Devlin's words.

"I told your husband, if I ever laid eyes on him again, I'd beat him to a pulp."

Strong words for a wimp, Sarah thought.

"Your husband acted like a gentleman—I'll give him that. He apologized and swore he'd never see Lorraine again."

Bob never apologizes. This man is absolutely crazy. Why am I listening to this?

"I'm sorry, Mr. Devlin. I know you mean well, but I'm sure you're mistaken. I ..."

"Think about what I've told you, Mrs. Shallot. I'll call you back in half an hour. Maybe you'll have some questions then."

The phone clicked in Sarah's ear, and then silence as she leaned back against the pillows, her eyes clenched closed, her fist tight against her lips. No. He's lying. Fred Devlin must be crazy to tell a story like that. No, impossible. Bob would never be

attracted to a woman like Lorraine. She's coarse. She's cheap. She simpers. No, impossible.

Sarah visualized Lorraine with her pendulous breasts, her blouse too small, a gap between the button and its hole wrinkling the material. The blouse stretched across Lorraine's D cups, held by the thread of one button. Lorraine's a slob. No, Bob could never be interested in a woman like that. She isn't even bright or witty; she's a bimbo. Bob couldn't—he wouldn't—be attracted to Lorraine. She was a terrible flirt. She batted her false eyelashes at any man who moved—no boy too young, no man too old. At the party, Sarah thought Lorraine had something in her eye, then realized that the bitch was eyeing Johnny. No, Bob could never go for that type.

Lorraine has no class, no refinement. She giggles. She's a bigot. Bob would never tolerate a bigot. No. Could Bob really be at the Holiday Inn with Lorraine? He bought a portable leather liquor case last year. He said it would be handy on trips. He didn't take it to Wisconsin. Why did he show it to her? She didn't drink.

It was Bob's suggestion that Sarah spend three weeks at Penland, rather than one week at Oxbow. If the goof on the phone was telling the truth, it would explain a lot. Bob's behavior in the last year was erratic. One minute he asked for more attention and love from Sarah, and the next he shouted and screamed at her. Were Bob and Lorraine really having an affair?

The phone rang at 11:00. Fearful, Sarah let it ring three times before she answered.

“Have you thought about what I told you? If you want proof, I'll send you copies of the letters.”

“Don't send me anything. Don't call me again. I ...”

“Believe what I'm telling you. I have nothing to gain by making you unhappy. I love my wife, and I want her back. Believe me, I'm telling you the truth.”

“Maybe. Maybe it's possible, but highly improbable.”

“Mrs. Shallot, I've been in and out of the hospital for the last two years. You've been in the hospital. You know what that's like.”

How did he know she'd been in the hospital?

“I haven't been able to make love to my wife, and I really don't blame Lorraine. I'm telling you, keep that husband of yours at home.”

Sarah gripped the phone in silence. Her mind rebelled, but her gut said otherwise.

“Okay. Think about what I've told you. I'll call you tomorrow.”

Numb and confused, Sarah moved from her bed like a sleepwalker. Dry-eyed, she fumbled through her last year's date book. She flipped through the pages until she found August. Fred Devlin had informed her that Bob and Lorraine had spent ten days together in Carmel, California, in August 1970. Across the dates August 10 and August 18, Sarah read “Bob—fishing trip.” She gasped as she remembered asking Bob why he took ties, belts, and good shoes on a fishing trip. “Oh,” he'd said, “we'll probably find some good restaurants. You know Dan loves to eat out as much as I do.”

Bob had screamed at her about spending money, and he'd spent ten days in California with Lorraine? Sarah rubbed her hand across the dates as if a wish could remove the evidence. She remembered the morning Bob returned, a day late from his “fishing trip.” He'd stood at the foot of her bed when he arrived home at 8:00 A.M., smelling of whiskey and perspiration, cursing and shouting. “Stop your damn bellyaching. So, I'm a day late. I don't have to report to you. I'm taking a shower and going to work.”

That night he'd convinced Sarah he wasn't due home the night before. “You're mixed up. I told you I was coming home this morning, not last night.” And Sarah apologized for her mistake.

Even when she was right, Bob convinced her she was wrong. Sarah remembered a sexy picture of Bob she'd found on her studio floor; she'd called him at the office for an explanation.

“I found your photograph, Bob. On the back you've written 'My love for all my days. Wish they were for all my nights.' Who was that picture for?”

“You, of course! I planned to surprise you. I must have dropped it in the studio by mistake.”

Sarah shook her head and tutted in disbelief. What a fool she'd been. Did Bob want her to discover his affair, and she was too dumb to catch on?

Louise had convinced her that Bob would never cheat. The evidence was just circumstantial. Bob would never have an affair with Lorraine or with anyone. No. He couldn't possibly have had an affair for over a year without Sarah catching on. She wasn't *that* dumb. What if Bob really was at the Holiday Inn with Lorraine?

Three hours later, Bob arrived home and found Sarah propped up in bed staring at the wall. Her face and voice strained as she said, “Sit down, Bob, I want to talk to you.”

“Give me a chance to undress first.”

“NO! Sit down and save yourself the trouble of redressing.” Sarah's words were crisp and clear, her voice serious and threatening. Bob obeyed. He stumbled into a chair near the bed. Sarah, gagging from the stench of whiskey on his breath, said in disgust, “You're drunk again. Are you sober enough to hear me?”

“What are you yapping about? Of course, I'm sober.” Bob said, as he lurched back in his chair and asked, “What's so important?”

“Mr. Devlin called me twice tonight. He said that you and Lorraine have been having an affair for over a year. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt—that man and his wife are both nuts. If you tell me the truth, we'll discuss it; but, if you lie to me, I'll know it and you can just pack your bag and get the hell out of this house.” If Bob's face registered any shock, Sarah was too appalled to notice.

“Come on, Sarah,” Bob cajoled. “You wouldn't believe anything a jerk like that told you,” he said as he unlaced one shoe and dropped it to the carpet.

Before he could unlace the other shoe, Sarah said, “Stop making yourself comfortable. What makes you think you'll still be here when the alarm rings. I

considered having your bags all packed and waiting for you at the door. Now that you're here, start talking.”

Bob bluffed, hedged, and lied. If he'd been sober, he might have pulled it off. He'd been lying to Sarah on and off for years.

“Okay, so big deal, I took Lorraine to Ravenna to see *Jesus Christ Superstar*. You were away at Penland and Lorraine had memorized all the words and . . .” Any semblance of disbelief faded as Sarah heard Bob hum the lyrics of the musical. Any passivity on her part ended with the word Ravinia.

“*YOU TOOK THAT SLUT TO RAVINIA!* I've begged you for years to take me there. You . . .”

“Don't get so excited. Lorraine had two tickets, and Fred couldn't go with her. He was in the hospital. It was innocent. Fred knew we were going.”

“If it was so innocent, why didn't you mention it?”

“You were in North Carolina. By the time you got back, I'd forgotten about it.”

Bob continued his lies. Sarah wanted desperately to believe him. His affair with Lorraine was too difficult to grasp, too unsettling, too sordid.

One lie after another, each one more outrageous than the last and Sarah's suspicions finally uncorked her anger. “*YOU HAD AN AFFAIR! I KNOW YOU DID. STOP LYING TO ME.*” She faced down each contradiction until Bob finally admitted the truth. He couldn't look at Sarah while he confessed and stared at his shoes.

“I've been trying to protect you. I'd like to kill that bastard for causing you so much pain. Sarah, I'm so sorry he called you.”

“You're sorry *he* called me! You sorry son-of-a-bitch. That's why you sent me to Penland for an extra two weeks. Sorry! From what I've read about affairs, men are supposed to be extra nice to their wives to relieve their guilt. “*You!* Nice to me? All you did while you had your affair was put me down, reject me, tell me I was skinny and undesirable. You spent money on a vacation trip with that bitch—that tramp—while you screamed at me for spending a little money. That sleazy, sequined dress you gave me

belonged on your slut, not on me. You miserable, rotten . . . How could you? How could you do this to me? To us?"

Sarah's anger waned as her tears started. "Intellectually, I can understand your reasons for an affair—my illness, your father's death, my neglecting you while I worked in the barn—but what I can't bear, what I just cannot tolerate is that you lied to me."

"For God's sake, Sarah, grow up. Did you expect me to tell you what I was doing? How could I tell you the truth? I had to lie." Bob, more sober by the minute, shrugged and said, "How can I expect you to understand? You've never had an affair. It was hard on me, Sarah; lots of times I wanted to confess, but I didn't want to hurt you. If I hurt you, I'm sorry." Bob rose from the chair, unbuttoning his shirt as he said, "You could never understand unless you experienced it." Still half-crocked, Bob chuckled, winked at Sarah, and said, "And if you do, I'll kill you."

Minutes later in bed together, Sarah begged for more humiliation as she pleaded, "Bob, if you meant it when you said you loved me, then make love to me now." Without answering, Bob turned his back to her. She heard his snore before she closed her eyes.

Sarah stayed in bed for three days and refused to eat. She cried until her eyes puffed shut. She refused to answer the phone and wouldn't talk to anyone but Bob. Once the door of betrayal had opened, Bob recited every detail of his affair. "She was just a mattress. She couldn't even come." Some inner compulsion spurred Sarah to listen. She heard times and dates and chose only to remember, "It didn't mean anything. I swear I love only you."

Sarah humbled herself again and begged Bob to make love to her, as if sex could erase the pain and humiliation. Bob refused, but he promised never to see Lorraine again. He admitted his choice of Lorraine filled him with shame. "That bastard, Devlin, why did he have to tell you? The affair was almost over anyway."

By the end of the third day, both Sarah and Bob were exhausted and there were no more details to discuss. Bob begged Sarah not to force him to leave.

Sarah said she forgave him; in fact she said it many times over the next year, but she never forgot. No matter how many presents Bob gave her, no matter how sweetly he behaved, she needled him. Her raw jealousy and anger remained unconcealed as she blurted verbal jabs. Any time Bob was late for dinner, she cross-examined him, and if he glanced at a woman across the room at a party, she raged at him when they were home alone.

Sarah moved through life like an automaton. Her feelings frozen, her life on hold. Dust piled up in the house, and she ordered pizzas rather than cook. She wore a stewardess smile, all mouth and lifeless eyes.

Sex remained a battleground. The first year after Bob's aborted affair, he had no mistress to screw so he fucked his wife. The second year, as Bob's impatience with Sarah increased, he prematurely ejaculated on a regular basis and left Sarah high and dry. Foreplay was no longer considered necessary and Bob behaved like a brute, squeezing Sarah's breast until she winced in pain. If she fussed, Bob told her to pipe down and stop complaining.

Sarah endured until the morning she discovered black and blue marks as she dressed. That night she confronted Bob and spoke with conviction when she said, "If you can't make love to me when I'm awake, keep your hands off of me when I'm asleep. In fact, keep your damn hands completely off of me. You're so rough and inconsiderate, I have black and blue marks all over my breast."

"You complained when I didn't make love to you, and now you complain when I do. There is no satisfying you."

Sarah laughed. "You haven't satisfied me in years."

CHAPTER 13

Sarah stood at the bathroom vanity brushing her hair and staring at her lackluster eyes in the mirror. She'd be forty-three in another month and she'd decided to ignore her birthday, and Christmas, too. The twins would be skiing in Aspen with their friends over the holiday, so why bother decorating the house?

Bob's face suddenly appeared in the mirror as he stood behind her. "Do you think we should have another big Christmas party?" he asked. "Or, go away for the holiday? Just the two of us."

Without pause, Sarah stared at Bob's reflected eyes and said, "It doesn't matter. By the time Christmas comes, I won't be living here."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Bob's voice raised as he grabbed Sarah's elbows and spun her around to face him.

"Leave me alone, Bob. Take your hands off of me."

"I am not leaving you alone," Bob spat out. He dragged Sarah into the adjoining bedroom and pushed her down on the bed. "Damn it! Sit there and tell me what you're talking about."

"This is a switch. I'm the one who always asked you, 'what's the matter?'"

"Why do you have to make a crisis out of everything? I just asked what you wanted to do about Christmas. For crissake, we've been getting along. You finally stopped mentioning Lorraine. What's with you?"

Sarah sucked in her lips, her eyes downcast as she mumbled, "I can't live like this anymore. I want you to find an apartment and move out."

Bob's hand groped for the chair behind him. He half fell and half sat as he wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve and moaned softly, "Sarah, don't do this to us. I love you."

Sarah rose from the bed and moved behind Bob's chair. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and said, "Oh, Bob, I don't know what's the matter with me. I've forgiven you, and I love you. Forget what I said."

That night Bob and Sarah had sex for the first time in months, only this time Sarah controlled the foreplay. She caressed every inch of Bob's sweet-smelling body. Her palms kneaded his back, his buttocks, and he sighed with pleasure. Then turning toward Sarah, he touched one breast briefly, slid his hand down her side and entered her. He plunged and receded and fell upon Sarah's breasts, asking, "How was it for you?"

"Wonderful," Sarah lied, her eyes clenched like fists. Longing to scream, "You're a selfish pig," she ignored the tears that slid from her eyes and remained silent. Now she couldn't complain that her husband didn't make love to her. But why bother. Bob was predictable, he fucked by the numbers, one fingertip to her breast, one to her vulva, in and out and over. Once Sarah timed the whole act on the bedside clock; three minutes from start to finish for the whole pitiful routine.

Sarah listened to Bob's snoring. She missed his arm around her, one hand cupping her breast as they drifted into sleep. She wondered when he had stopped cuddling and whispering, "This is the best time of the day." Bob no longer held Sarah's small breast, not since his affair with Lorraine—her breasts were enormous.

Sarah slipped out of bed and went down the stairs to fix a hot chocolate.

In December, Sarah acknowledged her birthday, but she didn't acknowledge that her prince had become her "Babbitt." She was pleasantly surprised and pleased when a stranger expressed shock that she had a son old enough to be married.

"Now that John is married, and Josh has moved to an apartment, you won't need twenty-five dollars a week for groceries anymore," Bob announced. Sarah still received a weekly allowance and nothing she said to Bob could convince him not to reduce the grocery money. "Twenty ought to be enough for the two of us."

When Josh and/or Johnny and his bride came to share a family dinner, which was often, Bob refused to increase the grocery money.

Family dinners were like old times, with something new added—a daughter-in-law, Nina. Bob sat in his usual place at the head of the table, and Sarah placed all the food platters in front of him, just as El had once placed her offerings before Bart.

Sarah sat at the opposite end, near the kitchen, so she could jump to refill the bowls and platters. Josh sat on Sarah's left, and Johnny and Nina on her right. John sat close to Bob's side, no longer fearful of his father's wrath if he spilled his milk. Wine had replaced milk; now it was John's turn to chide his father if Bob spilled his drink after too many pre-dinner martinis. Candles glowed, incandescent laughter, tinkling crystal, puns and hilarity—just like the good old days.

Sarah served dessert—strawberries smothered with freshly whipped cream. She placed a hardy portion in front of each member of the family and then sat down, excited at the prospect of a forbidden sweet. “Ma,” Josh reminded, “you know the doctor told you not to eat anything with sugar.”

“It's okay. I can cheat once in a while.”

“But, Ma . . .” Josh was interrupted by his father's words.

“Sarah, you forgot to give me a fork.”

“Bob, Honey, I'm sorry. I'm really tired. Would you mind getting one for yourself?”

Bob rose to his feet immediately and calmly walked to Sarah's end of the table. He picked up her dessert dish, turned it upside down and ground the strawberries into the white cloth with the palm of his hand. Then he calmly walked into the kitchen, washed his hands, and returned to the table clutching a fork handle, the prongs pointing toward Sarah like a dagger.

Sarah waited until the guests were gone before she confronted Bob. “Damn you,” she said through gritted teeth. “You humiliated me in front of the kids. I can't go on like this. Your hostility is killing me. Let's see a marriage counselor.”

“You need your head examined, not me. You're the one out of your fucking mind!” Bob's face flamed red, his eyes popped, the veins in his neck engorged. “And

you're too damn lazy to even bring me a fork! Go fuck yourself!" Bob sneered as he stormed out of the room and turned on the television in the rec-room full blast.

Bob's behavior—his irritation, hostility, and temper—once a private affair, had now become public. His tantrums became almost predictable as anyone who crossed him received a verbal blast. He no longer asked for forgiveness, and if he had, Sarah might have refused to accept an apology.

Stress and anxiety knotted Sarah's stomach as she watched her husband intimidate a sales clerk on one of their rare shopping expeditions. The red-faced clerk retreated to a back room and Sarah whispered, "It's bad enough you embarrass me at home, now you're doing it in front of strangers." She glared at Bob, pursed her lips in self-righteous anger, and hissed, "If you continue venting your spleen, you're going to need surgery!"

"You rotten shit. You're psycho!" Bob sneered in contempt as Sarah's eyes filled with tears.

At home Sarah retaliated by reminding Bob of his affair again. "I can't forgive your lies and your lousy taste. Lorraine is a stupid cow. Those big tits will be down to her knees by the time she's my age. You think you're a young stud because you made love to a cow!" Sarah ended her tirade with, "But I forgive you."

"Who gives a shit whether you forgive me or not! If you were more of a woman, I wouldn't have had an affair in the first place. Lorraine was soft, not a drag like you! Shut up about Lorraine, once and for all, you nagging bitch!"

That night Bob appropriated John's old room and listened to his own rock and roll record, "Put Your Head on My Shoulder." Day in and day out he played that same record over and over again. Sarah complained about the repetitious music, but nothing she said mattered. Bob now had another favorite, and Sarah could hear "Get It Up!" blare down the stairs night after night as she fixed dinner.

She'd threaten to leave Bob and he'd shout, "If you want to, what are you waiting for?" Their marriage remained in limbo while their surface activities remained the same—Bob at the office and Sarah in the house.

Sarah had tortured herself about Bob's affair for longer than it had lasted. After her last outburst she knew that she had pushed Bob too far and she promised herself she'd keep silent and not bring up Lorraine again. Her resolution lasted for a couple of weeks, and then compulsively she made another damning remark. She had to shout it to be heard above the rock and roll.

Trying another tactic, she drank malted milks to gain weight, hoping that “softness” added to her frame would make her more desirable. She had the beautician glue individual false eyelashes on her hooded eyelids. She had her ears pierced and every night she applied fresh makeup before Bob arrived home for dinner. She even planned a party . . .

The party of stuffed boredom and superficial laughter found Sarah in the rec-room fingering her water on the rocks. Dean, an old political ally, remarked on Sarah's disinterest in politics, and she responded, “I'm a dropout, Dean. The world goes on fucking up and I . . .”

“Sarah, what's with you?”

“I used to blush when I read that word scrawled on the wall of the ladies' room. I used to walk around it when it was chalked on the sidewalk. Now, I simply don't care. I'm tired of everything, including politics. I've lost interest since the Kennedys and King were murdered. Those three Ks were good men, now we're seeing a revival of the KKK. I don't like what's happening in this country. Viet Nam goes on and on, and now Nixon's in the White House. It's all too much. Doesn't anyone tell the truth anymore? Remember the night of Nixon's inauguration? I covered the TV in black so we wouldn't have to watch Nixon's two-sided face. I've detested that man since he defeated Helen Gahagan Douglas in the '50 election by calling her a communist. I . . .”

“What's really bugging you, Sarah? You always had strong political convictions, but I've never heard you so angry. What's going on?”

Sarah's voice softened as she said, "I thought with dedication and hard work we could turn this country around. My idealism died with Jack Kennedy." Then anger tinged her words again, "Besides, I no longer believe in the Kennedy myth. He was a cheat." *Just like Bob.*

"You've really changed. After Kennedy's death I gave you that memo about his affairs and you had a fit."

"Yeah, I remember. I was appalled when I read it. You told me I only believed what I wanted to. You were right. Now I know better. Most men are cheats.

"And women," Sarah rolled her eyes toward the well-dressed women lining the fireplace. "I know their conversation by heart. If I hear about one more fashion show luncheon, or bridge party, I'll throw up!" Sarah aimed her water glass at the men posing at the bar—she hated bars, especially the one Bob insisted they have in their own home. "At least they talk politics, but any minute their conversation will turn to inflation or income tax. No one says a word about the fact that we're all mortal, that in the next ten years or so someone at this party will be dead and buried."

"You're so morbid. Did Kennedy's death do this to you?"

"Yes, his death, my father's, John's." And the death of her marriage.

"Once I had hope. Now all I have is despair. All I see around me is materialism. Who's got the newest, the most expensive car."

"You're a fine one to talk about materialism. Look around you. The perfect house, perfect furniture, perfect husband."

"Dean, please excuse me. I've got to check on the kids upstairs. It's too quiet up there." Sarah, the college dropout, still enjoyed friendships with her former classmates. All young, they clustered together in the living room. No one talked. Everyone in the living room sat in silence and stared straight ahead. The only activity, passing a hand-rolled cigarette from hand to hand. Sarah picked up an ash tray and shoved it under a long ash about to fall to the carpet. Then she offered a crystal dish filled with cigarettes

and said, “Here, there's plenty of cigarettes, you don't have to share one.” Someone tittered, and Sarah wondered what was so funny.

Hank, home for spring break, leaned back in the Dux overstuffed chair. His feet up on the matching ottoman, one shoe tapping against the other in time to the music. (Sarah had hired a strolling musician for this party.)

Sarah gently pushed his shoed feet to one side and sat on the ottoman. Leaning close to him, she whispered, “I'm sorry to disturb you, but I need to talk. Remember when you told me to stop repressing my feelings?”

Hank, leaning forward to hear Sarah's soft words, whispered back, “Yeah, sure. I told you to let it all hang out.”

“Well, I've never mentioned this before, but I hate my life. I'm miserable. I . . .”

“Don't be shocked, Sarah, but I already know that. I've known it for a long time. Now what are you going to do about it?”

CHAPTER 14

Hank's question prompted Sarah to rush to the library and check out every available book on marriage. As she read about the mid-life crisis, she hoped and prayed that Bob's would end. She wanted to believe the worst was over, that she and Bob would mellow into a graceful old age. Together. Fairy tales aren't just for children.

In early June, as her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary approached, Sarah's marriage was still troubled. She begged Louise not to plan a surprise. "Promise me, Lou. No party. We have nothing to celebrate."

On June 26th, Sarah awoke with dread, afraid her milestone anniversary would be a disaster. She was pleasantly surprised when the florist delivered twenty-five long-stemmed red roses and a note from Bob, "Happy Twenty-Fifth. Be ready at seven, dinner at eight."

At 6:00 P.M., Sarah, immersed in bubble bath, reclined in the tub and considered her wardrobe. What "costume" to wear? Sarah had no idea where they were dining. The restaurant would be "first class," that's for sure. Everything had to be "first class" with Bob. Sarah smirked, yeah, first class. What was first class about Bob's affair? Lorraine certainly wasn't.

She twisted the faucet and hot water dribbled onto her washcloth. She laid the cloth on her shoulders, sunk back in the tub, and tickled her toes under the nearly boiling water trickling from the spout as if testing how much pain she could endure. She thought of the plans she'd made, in happier days, to celebrate this special anniversary. She'd wanted Father Mike to remarry them. She'd dreamed of a church wedding, with all the trimmings, to compensate for her marriage in the rectory. Sarah had planned to design a fabulous dress and had visualized herself standing in the vestibule after the ceremony, greeting her family and friends. Hell, now she didn't even know if she was Catholic

anymore. She'd stopped attending mass a year after her surgery. Would she and her husband even be together to celebrate their twenty-sixth anniversary?

She soaped her washcloth and scrubbed away her misery. She hoped she'd get through the evening without mishap. Dripping out of the tub, she thought about how old dreams die hard.

Sarah applied her makeup with deliberate care and dressed in a black linen sleeveless sheath dress and a white linen duster. She stood in front of the dresser mirror securing cultured pearls—a twentieth anniversary present from Bob—around her slender neck. She patted every hair in place and smiled into the mirror. Not too bad. Careful application of makeup concealed her complexion, but unfortunately, not her brooding eyes which were clouded with sadness.

At 7:00 P.M. Bob gallantly opened the Jaguar door and helped Sarah fold herself into the sports car. “Thanks,” she said and thought to herself what a pain this car was to her. She had to double herself in half to climb in and out, and she couldn't drive it because it was a stick shift. Bob had bought his show-off car to impress Lorraine, not her.

The Jag zoomed away from the curb as Bob announced, “Let's see how the old Poo House has held up. We haven't seen it for years.” It had been a yearly tradition to park across from the reconverted garage on every anniversary. In the old days, Bob would lean across the car seat, peck Sarah on the nose, and say, “See how far we've come? Aren't we the luckiest couple in the world?”

Sarah didn't feel lucky, but she smiled at Bob's suggestion and laughingly reminded him of the time he'd sat on the coffee table and fell through.

“Yeah, I remember,” he chuckled. “You picked glass out of my ass for a week. That's when we discovered the hot-shit coffee table your father bought us had the veneer painted on the underside of the glass.”

The celebrants reminisced on the short drive, and Sarah, beginning to relax, tensed once more as she spied her father's old tavern. Bart's DOG HOUSE had the same

address, but a new owner. The neon sign above the door glowed, FREDDIE'S LAST STOP. The sign was showing its age, Sarah thought, just like me. Bart had been dead over twenty years, and she still missed him. He'd never burst through the door again, calling out, "It's me, Baby. Gimmie a kiss. Are the twins awake?"

Now the DOG HOUSE had a new name, a fresh coat of paint, and, behind the tavern, a vacant lot. Weeds, three feet high, grew in the spot where the reconverted garage had once stood. "My God, it's gone. Someone's demolished the 'Poo House.' Who? When?" The symbol of happy newlywed days no longer existed. Her first married home had disappeared, and ironically, so had her happy marriage.

They drove on to the Loop in silence. Bob exited the Dan Ryan Expressway and drove down West Madison Street. Sarah stared out the car window at bums loitering in doorways and watched in amazement as one man dropped his pants and urinated against the curb. Her nose wrinkled in disgust. What irony, some minister's sons become drunks and a tavern owner's daughter despised liquor.

The Jag jolted to a stop in front of La Maison, and Bob asked, "Do you remember?" Sarah feigned pleasure, "What a nice surprise," she said, as she struggled out of the car, her dress pulled up to her thighs. The doorman stared at Sarah's legs, and she felt soiled.

She stood at the restaurant entrance while Bob gave his keys to the attendant. The building was older than Sarah, but it didn't look as shabby as she felt. When Bob took her to La Maison on their first date, she was so impressed. None of her other dates could order in French. At seventeen, she thought Bob, at nineteen, was a man of the world. Now, she knew that he'd spent the last of his navy discharge money just to show off. For the two years of their courtship, he didn't have enough money to treat Sarah to a movie. Their dates consisted of long walks and bowls of mushroom soup—that Sarah paid for. Or a drive in her mother's car, with Sarah picking Bob up at *his* door. Bob still lived with pretense—picking up the tab for people who had invited *them* to dinner. Tipping too

high, then screaming at his wife about *her* spending habits. Sarah chided herself about her negative thoughts. She had to stop. Bob *was* making an effort. So should she.

Sarah unfolded her white linen napkin and placed it on her lap, determined to be a good dinner companion. “Bob,” she said with excitement, “I saw a travel display in one of Field's windows. Spanish furniture and . . . I still wish we'd move to Spain. You always wanted to be a writer, not a lawyer. You could sell your practice, and we could . . .”

“Wow, Sarah, you're flying off in all directions. You're lucky you have me for an anchor.”

Bob leaned back into the banquette and inspected the elaborate menu with great care. “Would you like quiche for an appetizer?” he asked, and then without waiting for a reply, “Or Bouillabaisse? Bouillabaisse means catch of the day.”

“I'll order anything on the menu you want, Sarah, but you have to eat all of it. I'm tired of paying for your half-eaten meals.”

Sarah wondered if she were having dinner with her husband or her mother?

The cocktail lounge adjoined the dining room, and Sarah watched the bartender hold a silver shaker over his head. Frost formed on the sides as the barman shook someone's whiskey sour, and Sarah's thoughts turned inward again.

The bisque arrived, thick and rich with flecks of shrimp and crab. The waiter poured Pouilly Fuisse and held the glass out to Bob for his taste and approval. Bob sipped the wine, rolled it over his tongue, his cheeks puffing in pleasure. He held his glass at eye level and sighed over the wine, as if it were a rare brandy, and finally said, “Fine, but the glass you brought is for red wine, not white. Replace the glasses.”

Between courses, Bob handed Sarah a red velvet jewelry box, a wide smile of anticipation on his face.

“Bob, Honey, what a nice surprise,” Sarah said as she fingered the red velvet.

“You act as if the box were the gift. Open the case, Sarah, our entree will be here soon.”

Sarah gently pulled open the velvet lid and stared at sparkling earrings. It took her a moment to realize the earrings were sapphire and diamond, not paste.

“I wanted to buy you a huge diamond ring, but you know how short money's been. I know you prefer emeralds, but I couldn't afford them either. I hope you like this gift; if not, you can return the earrings to Field's.”

“Oh no, Bob. I'd never return your gift. Thanks,” Sarah said and blew a kiss across the table.

Bob didn't know her at all. She wanted an engagement ring for the symbol, not the value. If he'd bought her a speck of a diamond, she'd have been thrilled. But, earrings! What would she wear them with, her blue jeans? If she did, she'd look like a B-girl.

The waiter moved the serving fork and spoon in a rhythm of hand and eye. He tipped the platter, spooned the brown sauce from the bottom, and streamed it over the sliced filet of beef on Sarah's plate. “Thank you,” she said. The waiter turned his back, and Bob chided, “They're paid to wait on you, Sarah. That's why I leave a big tip. You don't have to thank them for doing their job.”

“Waiters are people, too, aren't they?” Sarah asked sarcastically.

Bob changed the subject and tapped the edge of his knife with his finger. “This service is abysmal,” he said, his impatience growing as he snapped his fingers and waved for the waiter, who deliberately looked in another direction.

Bob poked the beef on his plate with his fork and cursed. When the waiter finally arrived, Bob snapped, “I ordered rare, not well done.” He looked back to Sarah and said, “This restaurant has sure changed.”

So had they.

“Bob?” Sarah asked gently. “Why do you always make a fuss?”

Bob's face was filled with contempt as he glowered, “And why do you always make a fuss with me?” Sarah bit her lip to keep back the tears.

“Sorry, sir,” the waiter apologized, as he placed a rare beef filet in front of Bob. Bob stabbed the meat like an enemy and jammed a piece of beef into his mouth, his lips smacking in appreciation. He savored every bite as each tooth bit home. Sarah pushed the feathered potatoes from corner to corner on the gold-edged plate, her mouth closed, until her fork with three fresh peas, hung under her nose. She sucked the peas in and mashed them with her tongue.

The waiter removed Bob's empty plate and Sarah's, half-filled with food. “Was anything wrong with your dinner, Madame?” he asked.

“No, it was fine, thank you. I have a small appetite.” Bob didn't mention Sarah's politeness to the waiter again.

Over French pastry, Bob raised his wine glass and toasted, “Happy twenty-fifth! You look as beautiful tonight as the day we married. It just takes you longer.” Bob chuckled and finished his wine. Then he downed the last of his Drambuie—he drained the glass, to the very last drop.

In July, Bob had another invitation for Sarah. “The Rotary Club is having a dinner-dance. I know you hate these affairs, but I have a couple of reasons for asking you to attend. I hope you won't refuse.”

“Well,” Sarah chuckled, “give me a couple of reasons why I should.” Sarah planned to say yes if she could find one good reason. Since their anniversary, she'd wanted to please Bob. He'd pleased her that night when he'd said, “I'm truly sorry for the affair. Truly sorry I hurt you. One of us has to make a re-commitment, and I'm doing it. I love you, Sarah. Let's both try to make our marriage work.”

“Sarah!” Bob snapped his fingers in her face, “Where's your mind? I asked you if you'll go to the dinner-dance.”

“Sorry. What's so important about this affair?”

“The Rotarians have outdone themselves this year. They've hired a big-name band that plays music from the forties. My new millionaire client wants to attend, and I want to keep him happy. So, what do you say?”

“That's terrific! Who's the band leader?”

“Guy Lombardo.”

“Guy Lombardo!” Sarah chuckled. “I liked Glenn Miller and Harry James, but Guy Lombardo! Oh, what the hell, it could be camp. Sure, I'll go.”

The night of the Rotary dance, Sarah dressed in her black crepe, the sequins barely tarnished. The bodice was stuffed with falsies, a match for her attitude. Her back was so stiff she could have passed for a forties WAC. She felt like she was going into battle as she adjusted her sapphire and diamond anniversary earrings. She hated Rotary affairs. Why had she said yes, again?

The club president spied Sarah as she entered the decorated VFW hall and rushed to her side. He escorted the Shallots and Bob's millionaire client to their table. “It's good to see you again, Mrs. Shallot. It's been a long time,” he said, as he helped Sarah into her chair and then pulled the chair, with Sarah in it, onto the dance floor. Sarah leapt from the chair and rushed to the safety of the ladies' room.

She powdered her nose, composed herself, and then returned to their table, which was set for ten. Bob stood, pecked her on the cheek, and whispered, “I'm sorry, Sarah. Willie's an ass. The rest of the evening will be okay.” Sarah stayed glued to her chair for the next two hours and listened to the conversation progress from convivial to rakish, as bottle after bottle of wine was consumed. She thought she was at a carnival freak show when a stocking-footed woman with a horse face dashed up to the table, held out her size eleven-D shoes to Bob, and grinned, “Do you want to drink from my slipper, Prince Charming?” Not waiting for an answer, the woman ran in stocking feet to the next table, her long dirty-blond hair braided with ribbon and bouncing like a horse's tail, she shouted, “Do you want to drink . . .”

Sarah swallowed hard to push down the spectacle of a middle-aged temptress making a fool of herself and ignored the dried filet mignon on her plate. She watched a tall vacuous brunette, all angles, stab the air with arrogance as she danced by. Sarah wondered who the woman was. She seemed so out of place among the other women with their “Goldies” permanents, highly rouged cheeks, and open-toed slippers. Sarah thought most of the women looked like over-aged B-girls, but she knew they were all wives of local businessmen who'd been let out for the evening.

Bob left his melting dessert on the table and excused himself. Sarah watched him glad-hand from table to table, knowing he hated this form of politicking. She stayed at the half-empty table, as the waitress cleared. What the hell was she doing there? She didn't belong. She swore she would never, *ever* attend another one of these abominations.

She was startled from her thoughts as a man she barely knew, leaned across the table and said, “You don't want to be here anymore than I do. I can tell by your eyes.” A look of recognition passed between Sarah and the Vanderville Bank president. “Would you care to dance, Mrs. Shallot?” Jeff Van Otis asked. Jitterbugging near the makeshift bandstand, Guy Lombardo beckoned to them and they moved closer to the front of the platform. The band leader stepped down, kissed Sarah's cheek, and said to her partner, “That's a beautiful woman you're dancing with,” then turned and stepped back up on the platform.

“He's right, you know,” Jeff said with a grin.

Sarah smiled up at her partner. “Thank you,” she said in disbelief.

An explosion of breaking glass shattered the moment, followed by a crash, like rolling thunder, as a steel tray bounced against the wooden floor. Sarah turned toward the ruckus just in time to see Bob steady himself, one hand to the wall, and then watched as his body swung forward, one leg buckled under him as he fell flat.

Humiliated, Sarah toe-heeled her way across the room. She looked down at her husband sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, his mouth caught between a smile

and a smirk, as he looked up and belched a whiskeyed, “Bitch.” Sarah's left hand rose to her throat to silence a scream, as her free hand formed a fist.

In the parking lot, Bob handed Sarah the car keys. The judge didn't want to be stopped for drunk driving. No wonder he'd insisted they take her car to the dance, not the Jag. Sarah drove home in silence, while Bob threw insults about her driving, her weight, and her demeanor. Home at last, the ignition off, she turned to Bob and finally opened her mouth, “*Shut up, you drunk!*” she shouted, as she climbed out of the car and slammed the door behind her. Bob stumbled out of the car taunting, “Naughty, naughty. Mommy told you never to slam doors.”

The disaster of the Rotary Club dinner-dance was the final straw: Sarah, triple-humped with grief, aggravation, and despair, had reached the point of not giving a damn about saving her marriage. Four years of caterpillar changes since she'd chosen to live for Bob's sake. Now, she was determined to live for herself. She'd had enough grieving, more than enough. Now she'd do what she liked, when she liked. Every day Sarah repeated to herself, “No more Mrs. Nice Guy.” Her vocabulary reflected the depth of her anger and resentment, as every other word was “fuck” this and “fuck” that. The twins finally asked, “What's with you, Ma? You haven't cursed like that since your surgery. You're acting funny, different.”

“I *am* different.”

Sarah no longer met Bob at the front door when he arrived home from work. Now, he had to fix his own martini and drink it without Sarah's company. She worked in her studio without stopping at the usual 4:00 P.M. to prepare dinner. If Bob burst into the studio saying, “I've had a helluvva day,” Sarah ignored him.

After several weeks of this behavior, Bob confronted her. “I've reached my hand out to you thirty-seven times,” he said, “and you never responded.”

“You counted?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Bob, as my father used to say, 'You've got a handful of gimmie and a mouthful of lies.' You don't hold out your hand to me with love, you just want me to fill it. Well, fuck it!” Sarah turned on her heel and left Bob with his mouth hanging open.

Another week passed, and Bob wandered into the studio carrying his martini glass. “I guess if I want company, I'll have to come out here.” Sarah ignored him and continued painting. He sipped his drink, watched Sarah mix paint for a few minutes, and then interrupted. “I've got to admit some of these ugly constructions are really good. When do we eat?”

Sarah, without looking up from her work, replied, “Don't bother me. Can't you see I'm busy? I have to finish this section before the paint dries.” She was unaware Bob had left the studio until an hour later when she headed for the sink with a handful of paint-soaked brushes.

In the kitchen at 6:15 P.M. Sarah dished up leftovers and cold cuts. She placed the unappetizing meal before Bob, who sat at the table waiting for his dinner. He looked down at his plate and said with belligerence, “I'm sick of cold cuts. Dinner stinks.”

“It sure does,” Sarah replied as she sat down.

“When are you going to start cooking again? I haven't had a decent meal since I took you to La Maison, and that was months ago.”

“I don't know. Maybe never. You'll have to learn patience like I did when dinner rotted in the pot because you didn't bother to call to say you'd be late. You know, I have my first retrospective coming up in the fall. I have too much work to do to bother with cooking.”

Bob picked up his dinner plate, scraped it into the garbage, and left the kitchen without eating. Sarah emptied the dishwasher and piled in another day's worth of dishes. She wiped the counter and wondered what she would do if she could do anything in the world she wanted to. The question had never occurred to her before. What would she do? She'd live in California and finish college. As a child, she loved California. Hot

water burned her fingers as she scoured the sink. The idea was too crazy to even consider.

The following night, she served a Chinese take-out dinner and announced to Bob, “I need a check for Penland.”

“Forget it. No Penland this year. I don't have the money.”

“Find it. I already made reservations for the last week of August and the first two weeks of September. You found money for Penland when you wanted to get rid of me so you'd have more time alone with Lorraine. No matter what you say, I'm going. Leave your check on the credenza.”

Three weeks before Sarah's one-woman show at the Hammond Art Center, she returned from North Carolina with mononucleosis. The doctor ordered her to bed, and she laughed to herself, “No one's kissed me, not even Bob, and I get the 'kissing disease' at my age.” The doctor had ordered total rest, and Sarah half obeyed as she piled ribbons, lace, paper, and Crayolas on the top sheet and glued, pasted, and “rested” as required.

Her crayons were nontoxic, but her complexion was a toxic green-yellow when Bob announced on Friday, “I'm going fishing. You won't even notice I'm gone.”

Alone on Saturday and Sunday, Sarah dragged herself down the stairs to the kitchen. “Lots of rest and nourishment,” the doctor had ordered. “You must stay in bed, or you won't recover.” A lot Bob cared. If he'd cared he wouldn't be off “fishing” every weekend.

Sarah carried a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk upstairs and ate in bed. When she finished, she dialed Louise's number. “Hi, Lou, I wanted to test to see if I still had a voice. I haven't spoken to anyone since I talked to you yesterday.”

“Why does Bob leave you alone every weekend? He knows you're sick.”

“Who knows? He's probably sick of me being sick.”

Sarah didn't mention the fact that she'd poked through Bob's packed suitcase before he'd left and found ten ties and no jeans. She'd hidden a note at the bottom of the case, “I hope you and Lorraine have a wonderful time.”

Bob discovered the note before he'd left the house, and he stood at the foot of Sarah's bed and said in a calm voice, "Your suspicions are driving me crazy. I swear to you, on my father's grave, that I'm going fishing and nothing else." Sarah didn't ask why he'd packed four French cuffed dress shirts.

She remained in bed until the day before her opening when, half-sick, she hauled paintings, collages, and constructions to the Hammond Art Center. The director and her assistant helped Sarah unload her hatchback after each trip home for additional work. By mid-afternoon, after four hours of hauling pictures, placing constructions on pedestals, and arranging plants she'd borrowed from the local florist, Sarah's nervous energy deserted her. She lay outstretched on the cold museum floor and hoped Bob would arrive after work as he'd promised. She couldn't move but there was still so much to do. Two hours and three martinis too late, Bob arrived as Sarah hung the last painting.

That night as she dropped her jeans and panties, ready to collapse in bed, Bob drunkenly grabbed at her genitals and said with a sneer, "You're so dry, no one could make love to you. You oughta see a doctor."

Sarah stayed in bed most of the next day, but at 4:00 P.M., she was up and dressed for her opening. At the retrospective, a one-person triumph for Sarah, she walked among her friends and thought, huh, a one-person show—one person doing everything. She received congratulations, and friends inquired, "How did you do it, Sarah? I heard you were sick."

Bob walked to her side and slipped his arm around her waist as she stood talking to Dean. "She sure looks beautiful, doesn't she? No one would guess she's been sick." Especially you, Sarah thought, as she slipped out of Bob's arm. She did look beautiful, in a floor-length, hot pink double-knit dress, slit to the knee. Her rouged cheeks hid her sallow complexion. Bob kissed her cheek and said, "I'm so proud of you, Sarah." Too little and too late, she thought, as she turned on her heel without responding and walked to the entrance to greet an author.

Nicole hugged Sarah and handed her a book, saying, “Here's an advance copy of *Found Objects*. Your work's included.” Sarah, excited as a child at Christmas, flipped through the pages, proud to find her work and comments documented and published. Locating the index she chuckled, “I've got more pages than Joseph Cornell, and he's the father of box-makers! Wow!” Sarah beamed as she kissed Nicole on both cheeks, saying, “Thanks a million. You've made my day.”

Louise and Bob had prepared all the food for the open house after the retrospective, and Sarah had thanked them both profusely. When the last guest departed, she thanked them both again and said, “No way could I have cooked, on top of everything else. Thanks again, but I've got to get up to bed now, before I drop dead in the foyer.”

Physically and emotionally exhausted, she dragged herself up the stairs and flopped into bed, without removing her makeup. She heard Bob close the door after Louise, listened to his footsteps as he climbed the stairs, and observed him closely as he leaned against the bedroom door jam. “You should be proud of yourself, Sarah. You pulled it off.”

“I am. Thanks again for your help. I really appreciate you. You're a fabulous chef. If you ever want to give up law, you could . . .” Sarah laughed and patted Bob's side of the bed, “You look as exhausted as I feel, come to bed.”

Bob remained at the door and stared at Sarah as if she were a stranger. “Do you really appreciate me?” he asked.

“Yes, Bob. I really do.”

“Do you appreciate all the company dinners I've cooked?”

“That's what I've been thanking you for.”

“Do you appreciate the fact that I've let you travel? You went to Japan last year by yourself.”

“I paid for that trip with my malpractice settlement.”

Bob continued questioning without waiting for replies; “Do you appreciate that I've let you have an art career? Do you appreciate that I've let you have men friends? Do you appreciate that I let you go to college? That I paid your tuition? Do you appreciate that I've let you . . . let you . . . let you?”

“Okay, Bob, I catch on. Do you appreciate the years I worked in your office without pay? Do you appreciate my driving your mother all over creation? Do you appreciate the help I've given you in everything you've ever attempted—your law practice, your political career? Do you appreciate the years I devoted myself to your career rather than my own? Do you appreciate the years I've cooked and cleaned and raised the kids?”

Bob stared at Sarah, the look on his face incredulous as he said, “That was your duty.”

Sarah slid down in bed and pulled the covers tight under her chin without responding. She was appalled. *Her duty!* What Bob called her duty, she'd done for love. Nowhere on her birth certificate did it read: Your duties are: scrub floors, clean toilets, match stockings, wipe runny noses, pick up wet towels, kiss someone who reeked of whiskey.

He *let* her! What absolute bullshit!

CHAPTER 15

Several weeks later Sarah was startled awake by a frightening nightmare. Unsettled, her ulcer gnawing, she patted Bob's side of the bed and found it empty. She stretched across the bed and turned on Bob's bedside lamp. She checked the time. It was 3:30 A.M. That must be some meeting, she thought, as she eased across the empty bed and slipped her feet to the carpet. She stepped gingerly around Bob's shoes, lined up in pairs from bed to closet. Bob had already filled his closet, and the twins', with his shoes, and now the overflow littered the bedroom.

Barefoot, she padded softly down the stairs and into the kitchen. She poured a glass of milk and sipped it slowly, hoping to ease the pain in her chest. As she left the kitchen, she switched off the light. At the top of the stairs, she flipped off the hall light and groped her way back to bed. In the semi-darkness, she stubbed her toe on Bob's shiny patent leather shoe. Spontaneously, she mumbled, "You bastard," picked up the offending shoe, and hurled it out the bedroom door. She heard the shoe tumble down the stairs and thump at the bottom.

A long low moan and then a shrill scream broke the silence. Sarah, uncertain if it was she who screamed, bit her lower lip and speculated on the possibility that someone else might be in the house. Then she realized that that was ridiculous—she was home alone.

Deliberate now, she picked up another shoe. "You rotten no-good bastard!" she shouted as she hurled another shoe down the stairs. She waited for the thump at the bottom, then grabbed another shoe and heaved it. She launched shoe after shoe and sent Bob's shoes flying down the stairs like missiles. Thump. Thump. Thump. One by one, every shoe on the bedroom floor banged down the stairs and thumped at the bottom.

Shocked by her own behavior, Sarah stood quietly for a moment and realized in amazement how good she felt. She felt great. Terrific in fact! Bob's closet door stood open, and Sarah recognized more shoes lining the closet floor. She grabbed them by twos and sent them cascading down the steps. Thump, thump, thump. Thump. She reached for a suit, Bob's best, and tore the hanger from the closet rod. She tossed the suit down the stairs and listened to the wire hanger clatter against the stairway wall, watching the whirl of cloth as it landed softly on the jumbled shoes. In the eerie light, the mound of clothing looked like soft shit. Sarah heard herself shout, "You've treated me like shit long enough, you son of a bitch!"

Frenzied now, she whirled in a dance of anger, from closet to stairs hurling suits, shirts, and hats, sending Bob's wardrobe flying down the stairs. She had grabbed his last tie when she heard Bob's key turn in the front door. With one quick stride she threw the tie in the hall and closed and locked the bedroom door. She was back in bed with the lights out before she heard Bob mumble, "Son of a bitch!"

Sarah lay in bed holding her breath, her heart pounding as she waited for Bob's outburst of rage. Instead, all she heard were hangers scraping as Bob hung his clothing in the vestibule closet. The house was dark and silent as she listened to Bob's footsteps on the stairs, even and emphatic. She heard the twist of the bedroom doorknob as Bob turned it once and then the sound of his footsteps, muffled by carpet, as he turned from the door. She heard the den door open and quietly close.

Sarah stared at the bedroom bookcase silhouetted in the moonlight. She imagined the exhilaration she'd feel if she stood on the balcony screaming as she hurled each book to the patio below.

The books would certainly produce louder and grander thumps. She stared at the bookcase, debating her next move, and finally concluded that it would be she who would pick them up. Besides, she valued her books. Too bad she didn't drink, she had the perfect excuse to go on a bender. No need for liquor, she was already on

a high from tossing that bastard's clothes down the steps. She rolled to her side, nestled her forearm under her cheek, and immediately fell asleep.

She awoke the next morning at 9:30 feeling more rested and peaceful than she had in years. She hummed while she showered, the weight of years of indecision slipping from her shoulders. She dressed with care, applied her makeup, and left the bedroom prepared to do battle.

She found Bob in the den calmly reading the newspaper. He kept his eyes glued to the paper as she spoke to him from the doorway. "I'm leaving you," she said very calmly.

"Go ahead," Bob answered without lifting his eyes from the paper.

"This time I really mean it! You can bury your head in the newspaper for the rest of your life, for all I care, but I won't be here to see it."

Slowly, Bob raised his head and looked her directly in the eye. "I guess you do mean it. I can see you're determined. But you know what? I don't care anymore. I can't continue living like this—first you're leaving, then you're staying. As far as I'm concerned, our marriage was destroyed last night, along with my clothes at the bottom of the stairs. If you want to leave, go ahead. But the house is mine. I'm not moving."

Sarah turned, without responding, and quietly closed the door behind her. She should have thrown Bob and his clothes out the front door the night she learned about Lorraine. Now, she'd be the one to leave. There was no turning back.

Sarah grabbed her purse and car keys and drove directly to the local travel agent. She reserved a flight to California for the end of the week. That night she prepared dinner, and as they sat down at the table, she announced, "I'm moving to California. I've booked a flight for Saturday. I want to rent an apartment so I'll have a place to live when I leave here."

"Where are you getting the money for all this?"

“From you. If you don't want to give me the money, you'll have to be the one who leaves.”

A week later, Sarah returned from California and announced, “I've rented an apartment in San Pedro. It'll take me a couple of weeks to pack, so I'll continue cooking for you while I'm here, and you can continue sleeping in the den.”

“Fine. But don't mention this separation to anyone. If someone asks, just say you're going to California to finish college. After all, we don't know what will happen. This is just a trial separation, so let's keep it to ourselves.”

It took Sarah weeks and weeks to sort and pack the accumulation of seventeen years of living in the same house. She would closet herself in the studio for hours on end, sorting through her memories, reliving the pain of her father's death, and the new pain of her separation. Each evening she would console herself that the future had to be better than the past. She really believed she could close the door on her aching heart; that her grief and sorrow would stay locked away.

During the weeks of packing Bob spent more time at home than he ever had in the past. Like an adolescent, he continued to lay on his back in Josh's bed with the stereo blasting hard rock. The repetitious beat drove Sarah to distraction as she packed boxes in the living room. She yelled up the stairs in disgust, “For God's sake, Bob, turn that damn record off. I'm sick of listening to the same record over and over.”

“Shut up, you irrational bitch,” Bob yelled back.

I'm irrational! Sarah tuned into the words. “Can this be wrong...lay your head on my shoulder.” God damn him, that's the same record he played over and over during his affair with Lorraine. How disgusting he'd looked since then. His body was scrawny from Lorraine's focused dieting, his skin prematurely wrinkled from the forced starvation he'd gone through to get in shape for his mistress. Now, Sarah understood the motive for his fitness program, and the showers he'd neglected once his affair with her had ended. How glad she was to be leaving.

Sarah packed another box and listened to Bob's dry cackle roll down the steps. The tinkle and joy of real laughter had been replaced by Bob's hard, phony cackle. The sound gave Sarah goose bumps.

For the month it took Sarah to pack, she continued to provide dinner, either cooking or buying carry-outs. She and Bob ate alone at their table for four. The echo of past hurts haunted the room as she listened to Bob's lips smack while he devoured his meal. Her stomach burned with rage for all the years she'd cooked and received complaints rather than appreciation. The dinner hour had boiled down to, "What's Daddy's mood," just as it had when she was a child. Were the twins as frightened of their father as she'd been of hers?

Bob pushed his plate away, much as Bart had done. "Not bad for carry-out," he said. "Where'd you buy this chicken?"

During dinner Bob would ask trivial questions to break the silence or bombard Sarah with words that stung her soul.

"No one will ever love you again."

"Maybe not, but I'll love me and that will be a first."

"No one, but me, will ever know the hell you've been through."

"Maybe I'll be in such a good place, I'll be more interested in the future than the past."

"You're insecure, Sarah. You'll bat around like a ping-pong ball. You'll never make it without me."

"You've always told me I was insecure, so I stayed. Now I'm leaving, because you said it once too often."

"I'm sorry I ever paid for your therapy. You were a much nicer person without it."

Sarah had her turn at bat, too. "You let me know you, Bob—really know you—and now you dislike me for knowing."

Bob stared at the tablecloth and nodded his head up and down without speaking.

Meal after meal, Sarah watched Bob's cheeks puff as his lips smacked, at least she would no longer have to put up with Bob's repulsive habits when she dined alone. Were disgusting personal habits revealed when the veil of love was lifted? It occurred to Sarah that Bob might be repulsed by some of her behavior.

“You've always known my strengths and weaknesses, haven't you, Bob?” Sarah asked.

“Yes.”

“You were afraid if I knew my strengths, I'd leave you?”

“Yes.”

“So you put me down, so I wouldn't know?”

“Yes.”

“You know, if you hadn't constantly put me down, I never would have thought about leaving you.”

Bob and Sarah's eyes held across the table, an intimacy between them more real than the years they'd tossed together in bed.

“Was I any good in bed, Bob?”

“If you like the type.”

“Type? What does that mean?”

“You came only once, like a man. Women are supposed to have multiple orgasms.”

Sarah carried her paper plate to the kitchen and dumped it in the garbage and left.

Night after night, Sarah and Bob plugged into each other's pain as they rehashed old sorrows and unveiled truths they'd managed to conceal.

“You know, Sarah, if I'd married someone else, I might not have had so much suffering. Your father's death, your operations; your illnesses really did me in.”

“You think you've suffered? What about me? You were just a witness. You watched my pain, I endured it. You observed, I experienced. You watched me bleed, but it was *my* blood.”

Every dinner hour held a new revelation.

“When we were young, I leaned on you, Bob. After your father's death, you leaned on me. Now, we're both exhausted from grief and despair, and neither of us has a place to lean. We can barely support ourselves.”

Aware of the truth of her words, and filled with sadness, Bob asked, “Why are you moving to California? It's so far away. Why not rent an apartment in the city? Then, at least we could see each other once in a while and try to talk out our problems.”

“No, Bob, I'm moving to California. I realize how difficult this separation will be. Alone, after all our years together. But, if I stayed in Chicago, you'd call and ask me out to dinner. I'd accept, and we'd probably end up sleeping together more than we have in the last several years. What would that solve? In the morning, we'd be right where we are now, loving and destroying each other.”

“Yeah, I guess. But, California's so far.”

“True, far enough. So far that, if I weaken and call you out of fear and loneliness, it will be too far for you to come and save me. I'll have to save myself.”

Bob reached for Sarah's hand across the table, held it while he looked in her eyes, and said, “I still love you, you know.”

“I still love you, too.”

Sarah's 9:00 P.M. bath was a ritual. She'd soak in the bubble bath and remember another scene from her merry-go-round years of marriage. Delivering cold drinks to Bob as he weeded the backyard. Answering one of her mother's interminable phone calls. Lying to Bob's clients, “No, I'm sorry, Mr. Shallot is not at home.”

Bubbles bursting around her, she wondered if leaving Bob would end all her weariness and despair. Her impoverished soul needed positive thoughts so she fantasized her future career as a major artist, with a one-person show at the Whitney Museum. She thought positive thoughts would give her a better chance of achieving her goals. Alone, she might live in poverty like many artists, but she decided she'd rather wash dishes than continue to live like this.

Bob and Sarah walked through the house, making decisions about who kept this and who kept that, their eyes on the furniture, not on each other. Privately, they remembered the joy of each purchase, and both felt the inevitability of Sarah's departure. There were no arguments. When some object appealed to both of them, Bob would raise his voice ever so slightly. "Keep it, Bob," was Sarah's typical response.

Bob "allowed" Sarah to choose Josh's bed and John's dresser, but he insisted on keeping the rest of the furniture for himself. It really didn't matter. If Sarah needed furniture, she'd build it herself. She'd taken shop. She knew how to use tools. Besides, she consoled herself, maybe Bob would drive to California, beg for forgiveness, and drive her back home. The Salvation Army would be glad to accept the kids old furniture. Then, petulant, she thought, Bob could just pay to ship her antique desk and chair back home.

There were no arguments about the distribution of twenty-five years of accumulation, until the Great Books were discussed. Sarah offered to divide the set and gave Bob first choice of volumes.

"No," Bob said. "These books can't be divided, they're a set."

"We were a set and now we're divided. I've given in to you on everything else," she said, her voice raised, "but I insist on my half of the Great Books."

Bob, peevish, glared at her and said, "Take them all!" He sat, his face sullen, and watched Sarah pack each volume. All the while he bitched, "You're selfish. You'll never read those books. If you were articulate, you would have been a writer,

not an artist. You don't need those books, I do." Sarah sealed the carton with masking tape and marked "Great Books" across the top with a black marker. These books were symbolic. Bob bitched when she'd bought them, now he bitched because he couldn't have them all. He chose the \$10,000 Hopper drawing, she wanted the \$275 Rauschenberg print. He even bitched about that. He'd given her that print as a present, and now he tried to convince her it belonged to him. And he said she was selfish.

Bob reached into the freezer compartment of the self-defrost refrigerator. He removed a tray of ice cubes and ran water over them in the sink. Sarah, walking past him, carried an armload of towels, and Bob said, "Hey, put down those towels a minute. I've got a problem. The Brady case"

"When didn't you have a problem? I've got a few of my own."

"Right. Well, my problems are more serious than yours," Bob said. The ice cubes tinkled as they collided with his glass, while Sarah's fear and anxiety consumed her. She shoved the laundered towels into a drawer and left the kitchen without responding.

Sarah's packing distanced her fears during the day, but at night they waited for her in bed. No longer able to discuss her fears, real or imagined, with Bob, she wrote them nightly in her journal:

In ten days it will be December first, the day I leave. I've never driven over two hundred miles by myself, and now I'll be driving over two thousand. What if I get a flat? I don't know how to change a tire.

Bob thinks *he* has problems. Ha. The nerve of him, asking me to pick out wallpaper for the guest bathroom before I leave. I've begged him to let me replace that wallpaper for years. Replace it now? Not on your life. I won't be here to entertain his guests.

Sarah hadn't consistently kept a diary since she was twelve years old. She still had the spiral notebook that contained her impressions of camp, with descriptions of her cabin-mates. Now she had a dual purpose for writing. One to express her anxiety and stress, the other as a reminder. On lonely nights in California, she could reread her entries and remember why she'd made the decision to leave Bob.

But what if Bob was right? What if no one would ever love her again and she had to spend the rest of her life alone? Sarah knew the chances of meeting single men at her age were minimal.

She laid her journal on the night table and turned out the light. Men want young women, she thought. Even older men. Especially older men. She was almost forty-four. Rolling to Bob's side of the bed, Sarah cried herself to sleep.

In the morning, she counted boxes, numbered each one, and wrote the numbers and contents in a notebook. Then, she called Mayflower Movers. That evening at dinner, she said, "The movers will pick up my things on Monday."

"What do you mean, 'movers'?" Bob bellowed, his eyes bulging from their sockets as he raged. He looked like a stranger out of control as he ranted and raved about the cost of movers. Sarah looked at her husband, feeling disgust and pity. He has a man's body, she thought, and he's having a child's temper tantrum.

"Okay, Bob. You say you can't afford to pay movers. Then, how do you propose I get my things to California? The few things you've allowed me to take."

"You got the Great Books," Bob sneered, as Sarah wondered how she had managed to live so long with this angry, selfish man.

She looked at him, unable to disguise her contempt, and said sarcastically, "Okay, how will I get my Great Books across the country?"

"Rent a U-Haul. That's all I'll pay for."

"A U-Haul! I've never driven over two hundred miles by myself, let alone dragging a U-Haul."

“Other people do it. You'll figure it out.”

She was too tired to fight any more. Maybe Bob didn't have the money. Maybe, if she were fair, Bob would be. She'd manage—somehow.

“Okay, Bob. Tomorrow I'll cancel the movers and rent a U- Haul.”

Sarah and her mother met for lunch at Phil Smidt's. Elizabeth greeted her daughter, saying, “It's about time you met me for lunch. You're always too busy to spend time with your mother.” Untypically, Sarah made no apology and steered her mother to a corner table. They sat across from one another, eating boned lake perch soaked in melted butter. The entree was so tasty, Sarah ate every morsel, the first complete meal she'd eaten in weeks.

For dessert the waitress served hot strawberry pie smothered with whipping cream. Sarah chose this moment to announce, “I'm leaving Bob and moving to California.”

“You're what?”

“Bob and I are separating, Mom. It may give our marriage a chance.”

“You're not being logical, Sarah. How can separating improve a marriage? Be reasonable, for once in your life.”

“I *am* being reasonable,” Sarah retorted, keeping her voice low. “You and Daddy separated—a couple of times—and you got back together. Weren't you two separated when you and I lived alone in California?”

El looked at her dessert and changed the subject. “Have you told the twins yet?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“What was their reaction?”

“They were upset, naturally, but, in a way, I think they were relieved. They told me they've been waiting for years for the other shoe to drop. That surprised me. I thought I did a good job of covering up.”

“You sure kept it from me. But why California? It's so far away. You could find an apartment in the city. Then, you'd be close to me. That would be great. We could go to the theater; we could eat our meals together every night and...”

“I'm leaving on December 1st,” Sarah said.

“But that's next week. Why didn't you tell me before? I could have helped you pack.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. It was hard doing everything herself, but Sarah was used to it.

“California's so far. You'll be so far away from me.”

“I don't want to live on the fringe of my former life, Mom. Bob and I were the couple who lived on the hill. I want a new life. I only regret not leaving when I was younger. On the other hand, how would I have supported the twins? At least now they've both had an education and are on their own.”

“What are you talking about? You're still young.”

“I'll be forty-four in less than a month. That's not young.”

“Yes, it is. I'm sixty-four. You're still my baby, my little girl.”

Sarah would soon be a grandmother, and her mother still referred to her as a “little girl.” Sarah wondered if she could survive the rest of this lunch.

“Sarah, you could make up with Bob. Why are you so stubborn? You don't want to end up old and alone like me. Aren't you frightened?”

“Sure.”

“Do you know anyone in California?”

“Sort of. That week I spent on the West Coast I rented an apartment so I'd have a place to live when I moved. While I was there, I looked up an artist pen pal of mine. We've been writing and exchanging information on art exhibitions for the last couple of years. Augusta's your age, and he told me he'd act as my mentor and introduce me to the L.A. art community.”

“I wondered why you went to California alone. Oh, Baby, why didn't you tell me before? I could have helped you.”

Sarah hated it when her mother used that name. It was different when Bart had called her Baby. But the last time he'd called her his “Baby,” she'd been twenty-two.

“Ohhh, Sarah.” El, who rarely cried and kept her emotions tightly controlled, choked up now. Her eyes were shiny with tears that refused to drop, as she said, “I really love Bob. He's a fine man. Are you absolutely sure you're doing the right thing?”

Huh? Sarah couldn't believe her ears. Now that she was leaving the only man she'd ever loved, it seemed that her mother was finally forgiving her for marrying him. There was no winning with this woman. Sarah drained her water glass trying to dissolve the lump in her throat while Elizabeth continued with her advice.

“Listen to me, Sarah Mindel Shallot. I've been alone for over twenty years, and it's no fun living without a husband. Every woman needs someone to fight with. Sarah, are you listening to me?” El asked as she reached across the table to poke Sarah's arm. “You're always in a fantasy world. You don't know what reality is. I've had to support myself. I . . . I . . . I . . .”

They both lived in fantasy, but it was Elizabeth who had the nervous breakdowns. Sarah had dealt with the horror of her father's murder while Elizabeth escaped reality in catatonic silence.

“Don't look so sad, Baby. It's not the end of the world. If you get into trouble in California, you can call me and reverse the charges. I'll help you.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

Outside the restaurant, Elizabeth clung to her daughter as they hugged and said their good-byes. Sarah pulled away, saying, “Mom, cheer up. I'll probably be

back before you know it.” She wondered if she would. “Good-bye, Mom,” she choked out. Sarah's voice sounded like an accordion on the last squeeze.

Sarah drove the familiar road to Vanderville on automatic, the car seemed to have a map of its own. It knew when to turn, stop, and drive. Sarah's thoughts drifted from lunch with El, to Bob; back and forth from her mother to her husband to her mother until she finally concluded that she had married her mother. They were both selfish and critical. Both “penny wise and dollar foolish.” Both thought they knew what was best for her and they both resented her desire to be a professional, not an amateur artist.

There was one difference. For all her faults, Elizabeth wasn't sarcastic like Bob; sarcasm was too subtle a put-down. She insulted her daughter with direct comments about her appearance, her . . . ah, yes, another similarity, Bob was direct, too, when he wasn't sarcastic.

Sarah parked in the driveway. Sarah no longer believed in promises. Bob had promised to love her forever and that was just another one of his lies.

The day before Sarah's departure, Bob stood in the kitchen and asked, “Do you want me to take out the garbage before I leave for work?” Sarah nodded. She wondered why he was being considerate now. His thoughtful behavior made leaving him more difficult.

Bob picked up a white cardboard box, tucked it under his arm, and picked up the garbage bag. Sarah opened the back door for him and he headed toward the alley. Did he realize he was about to throw out Sarah's wedding dress?

On her last day at home, Sarah wandered from room to room, memorizing every nook and cranny she'd cared for, worried over, cried about, and enjoyed for seventeen years. Outside, she wandered through the back yard and remembered helping Bob plant the saplings that had now become sturdy trees. She carried a twig to the alley and stared at the faded white dress box resting next to five garbage cans. That dress was like her marriage, not good enough to keep. When she'd worn it on

her wedding day, her head had been filled with dreams of a happy future. Now that dream was dead.

Folding her arms across her breasts, Sarah closed her eyes and stood in the alley rocking back and forth on her heels and toes until she realized what a fool she must look to the neighbors. She knew with certainty that at least one of them would be peeping through the curtains, watching her.

Inside the house again, she wrote a brief note to Louise, her pen and her heart dragging across the unlined paper.

Dear Lou,

Thank you for all the support you've always given me, especially this last month. Without you to talk to every day, I would have been truly lost. I miss you already and I won't leave until tomorrow morning. If I tried to tell you, face-to-face, how terrible I feel, I'd break down, that's why I'm writing you this note. You're Bob's sister, but you are my best friend.

I'm not deluding myself; I know the days ahead will be difficult. I'm fairly intact, all things considered. Somehow, I'll carve a new life for myself, like a child taking one step at a time until she learns to walk without support. I have no choice. Pray for me. I'll love you forever.

Sarah stuffed the letter in an envelope, sealed and stamped it, and placed it in her purse. She'd mail it after she left Vanderville.

After dinner on her last night, Bob remained in the living room with Sarah, rather than retiring to "his" den to play rock and roll. He sat next to her on the couch and slowly moved his arm from the cushions until it rested gently on her shoulders. When she didn't move, he wrapped his arm around her and asked in a stricken voice, "How did this happen to us? We were so in love."

"You were always afraid I'd try to dominate you, like your mother dominated your father. So you hit me before I moved, and I winced before you struck. We tried. God knows, we tried to make our marriage work. I wish you all the best. I hope you have a happy life."

"I hope you mean that, Sarah. I wish the same for you."

Bob and Sarah spoke in whispers, intimate words, their hearts aching as they uncoupled. They both knew their marriage was over, that this was more than a trial separation. They both regretted that knowledge.

Bob whispered in Sarah's ear, "Let's go upstairs." They were no longer a couple, but in bed, they coupled one last time, their early passion rekindled as they touched each other with tenderness and love. Bob's lips were hungry for Sarah's and he searched her mouth with his tongue. Then he kissed the nape of her neck tenderly and gently traced his fingertips down her spine. Nuzzling his head between her breasts, he licked his way to her nipple and aroused it with a pointed tongue. Gasping with pleasure, Sarah reached to grasp Bob's firm, hard penis, and he covered her breast with his mouth and sucked while he explored her vulva with one fingertip. Sarah's body moved in a sensuous rhythm as she spread her thighs wide apart and absorbed the length of Bob's middle finger into her moist vagina.

"Now, now," she panted, as Bob rose on his knees and slowly entered her. He moved his hips and penis in a rotating figure eight and asked, "Do you like that?"

They climaxed together in a burst of wild, uninhibited energy. Their passion spent, they pleased each other with enduring words of love. Bob's goal of a simultaneous climax had finally been achieved and he felt protective and was sincere when he warned Sarah, "Be careful in California. Don't undervalue yourself." He kissed Sarah's cheek and rolled over to sleep.

Sarah rolled over, her back to Bob's. She thought it ironic that he would say that now, after all the years he'd spent belittling her.

At midnight, Sarah awakened to a popping sound in the living room. She crept down the stairs, turned on the overhead light, and discovered glass fragments littering the carpet. Puzzled, she traced the glass to its source—the twelve-inch glass bubble on a twenty-inch glass stem that she'd purchased at Penland. It, too, had spontaneously exploded—like her life. She crept back up to bed to sleep beside her husband for the last time.

“I can't hold you and I can't leave you,
And sorting the reasons to leave or hold you,
I find an intangible one to love you,
And many tangible ones to forego you.”

Sister Juana Ines de la Cruz
translated by Judith Thurman

CHAPTER 16

In the morning it took Sarah three-quarters of an hour to drive the five miles from the U-Haul lot to Van Dyke Drive. Turning a corner with the U-Haul dragging behind the car was a major accomplishment. Sarah sighed with relief and pride as she parked at the curb.

Johnny stood on the driveway directing his mother, and after five attempts she managed to back the U-Haul up the driveway to the open garage. The Pontiac faced the street, ready to exit.

“Congratulations, Ma,” John joked, as Sarah walked toward him. “You did it. I had my doubts.”

John had already dragged all the packed boxes from the house to the garage, while he'd waited. Now he proceeded to climb in and out of the U-Haul, stacking boxes in an efficient manner. He secured the loose items, and then packed the back seat of the Pontiac while Sarah sat at the wheel and checked the rear view mirror to see if her vision was blocked.

Finally, at noon, hours behind schedule, she was prepared and ready to leave. She gunned the motor a few times, shifted into drive, and lightly pressed her foot to the accelerator. The car lurched forward a few feet and abruptly stopped. The dead weight of the U-Haul had yanked off the back bumper before the Pontiac had reached the street.

She sighed, turned off the ignition, and wearily climbed out of the car. She assessed the damage, stared at her shoes, and then looked at her son. John stood in the driveway with his palms upraised as he shrugged and asked, “What now, Ma? Now what?”

Sarah inspected the U-Haul, listing to the cement, chains scraping the drive, the car's chrome bumper tilted at an obscene angle. Then she turned back to John and asked, "If I leave the U-Haul in the driveway, do you think your father will send my things?"

"Sure, Ma," Johnny laughed. "Dad can't get his Jaguar in the garage, the U-Haul's blocking the entrance."

"Okay, John, I know what I'll do. Please release the chains from the car to the trailer. I'm leaving with whatever I have packed in the car."

A half hour later, Sarah, emancipated from the burden of the U-Haul, parked the car at the curb, jumped out, and trotted back to her son. He stood next to the dead U-Haul, his helpless expression as rag-tag as the car bumper resting near his feet.

"This is it, Honey," Sarah said, her arms outstretched. "Thanks for all your help."

Johnny crushed his mother in a bear hug and choked out, "I'll miss you, Ma."

Sarah buried her face on her son's chest for a moment, then she stood on tip-toe to kiss him on the cheek once more. "I love you, son," her voice broke on the last word. "Please write." Then she turned and walked down the driveway for the last time.

Back in the driver's seat, Sarah turned the key in the ignition once more, waved to John standing at the curb, a lost expression on his face, and without looking back, drove away.

Because of the late start, she only drove five hours that first day. That night she found a cheap motel in Springfield, Illinois and managed to snatch a few hours sleep before heading out at 6:00 A.M.

At 4:00 P.M. she had reached the outskirts of Kansas City and, gripping the steering wheel with both hands, she listened to erratic tornado warnings fade in and out above the static of the radio. "Temp... torna ...watch ...heavy rain ... expect ... minimum visibility ..."

Expected rain? More like torrent, Sarah thought, as rain pelted the windshield like water gushing from a fire hydrant. The radio antenna wiggled in the high wind, the

car vibrated, and Sarah's hands held tightly to the steering wheel. How lucky she was to have left the U-Haul in the driveway.

By 6:00 P.M. the rain finally stopped. The sky looked like muddy dishwater as Sarah kept her eyes on the highway and thoughtfully itemized the contents of her car: an overnight bag filled with makeup, an extra pair of blue jeans, two clean blouses, a sleeping bag, acrylic paints, two brushes, the Rauschenberg print, her record player, and one plant in a ceramic container that she couldn't bear to leave behind. She'd begged Bob to let her give all her plants to Louise, but he'd refused. She knew he wouldn't water them and they'd die from his carelessness.

By the time Sarah pulled into the first motel boasting a flashing neon "Vacancy" sign, she felt as wilted as the plants she'd left behind.

Driving west on the third day, Sarah observed that super-highways had replaced Route 66, the route Bart had chosen whenever he drove his family to California. In the early thirties, the landscape had been interesting, now there was nothing but miles and miles of cement. If Sarah missed a marker sign, she couldn't be certain she'd know which state she was in. All of America had become homogenized.

Outside Wichita, Sarah stopped at another interstate restaurant, its cement block building was identical to the one she'd stopped at for breakfast. She'd choked down a burnt piece of toast and a cup of lukewarm tea at 6:30 A.M. and was ready for lunch by 11:30. She entered the restaurant and her nose wrinkled at the offensive odor. Sarah thought all the interstate restaurants smelled like school gyms.

She pushed her tray past the self-service counter, the smell of rancid oil reminding her of a high-school cafeteria, and her appetite vanished. Nevertheless, she chose nourishing food, choices even Elizabeth would approve of. She emptied her tray at a scrubbed table for four that reeked of the damp rag used to wipe it. She sat down feeling very alone, picked up her fork and looked down at her plate. Cold, bloody roast beef; wrinkled carrots; and a wilted chef salad. She laid her fork across the untouched food,

pushed the plate away, and stared out the window. If she'd served a meal like this to Bob, she'd never have heard the end of it.

Too weary to return to the car immediately, Sarah lingered at the table sipping cold tea, thinking of her mother's parting words.

“Your career came between you and Bob. I've told you many, many times, a woman has to give ninety percent in a marriage and a man ten percent. You should have done what your husband wanted. Why don't you ever listen? I'm telling you this for your own good.”

Sarah disagreed with the percentages. She believed both partners in a marriage should give one-hundred percent. She had.

Pushing the wilted salad farther away, Sarah remembered the advice her mother had given her the night before her marriage. Elizabeth had dug deep into her cedar chest and retrieved a small velvet pouch. Opening it she'd poured twenty-five silver dollars into Sarah's outstretched hands. Sarah thought it was a gift, but soon realized her mistake when her mother said, “Every woman needs money of her own to fall back on. I've had these silver dollars since before I married.” Replacing the silver in the velvet pouch, she'd added, “You better hide some money of your own.”

At the time, Sarah had laughed to herself at her mother's foolishness. She wouldn't need to hide any money from Bob, he loved her. Eventually, Sarah learned that lesson on her own. Bob had left her home alone with the three-year-old twins and she couldn't find a dime in the house to buy them an ice cream cone. Now Sarah wished she'd listened to her mother's advice— even Elizabeth could be right occasionally.

Sarah opened her purse and surreptitiously counted the money in her change purse. One-hundred-and-five dollars remained of the \$150 Bob had given her to cross the country. That money was to cover everything—gas, lodging, and food.

Tucked away in her wallet was \$700 in traveler's checks. Before she'd left she'd insisted Bob repay her. He'd borrowed the money after she'd received her malpractice settlement. She couldn't spend those traveler's checks. That money was the only security

she had. She wished she'd emptied their savings account like other women did before they left their husbands.

Another day of driving and then another. Sarah, afraid of December snow in the Rockies, had chosen the southern route to California. The drive seemed endless. The rhythm of the day: Drive west until the sun blinded, then park off the road at a rest stop and nap until the sun set. At dusk, resume driving until midnight, then find a cheap motel and sleep fitfully for a few hours. As soon as she awoke, as early as 4:30 A.M., she'd be back behind the wheel, driving west. She enjoyed the false dawn and the real one, amazed at the beauty she'd missed by sleeping late.

Sarah viewed the rosy pink sky with pleasure, and then her fears would return. She'd hold the route instruction card in one hand and the steering wheel with the other, grateful El had ordered the route cards from AAA. Sarah, unable to read a map, was certain that without the cards she'd take a wrong turn and end up in Canada. She couldn't tell north from south or up from down. She'd frequently goofed when Bob insisted she navigate while he drove, and he'd rant about her stupidity. "Any dummy can read a map!"

On long stretches of highway Sarah relaxed her vigil, her thoughts flitting from one thing to another like fruit flies over decaying fruit. One minute she'd focus on her present predicament and the next some jarring memory would have her reliving the scene.

Years ago, Sarah had asked her mother, "Do you love me? Really love me?"

"Why would you ask a question like that? Of course I love you. I waited for you to be born. I always wanted something that belonged to me alone."

Sarah gripped the steering wheel so tight that her hands hurt, then she relaxed her grip. Did love mean possession? Did being a daughter mean she was owned for life? In California she'd be 2,000 miles away from the people who thought they had the right to control and own her, but she wasn't sure she had enough self-knowledge to own herself.

A well-marked sign caught her attention. “Sweetwater, Texas—150 miles,” and she grinned remembering Sweetwater was the birthplace of her college roommate. She considered calling Ellen's parents when she arrived in town, but changed her mind.

There was no one she wanted to talk to.

The monotony of the flat plains of the Texas panhandle and the cloudless sky lulled Sarah, while the sun blistered the hatchback and the heat wilted her blouse.

“Temperature in Dallas, ninety-eight degrees,” said the radio announcer. “Aren't we happy we live in Texas, folks? In Chicago the temperature is five degrees, and the first blizzard of the winter has dropped ten inches of snow on the windy city.”

Sarah fiddled with the radio dial as she searched for music. She heard “Get it up,” and in disgust turned off the radio and drove on with only her thoughts for company. Despite the heat, it was better to be in Texas than cleaning up the carpet after Bob tracked in snow.

When Sarah finally arrived in California she was certain the weather would be better than it was in Texas or in Illinois. California. The fragrant odor of orange blossoms, and the farmer's market on Saturday morning. Sarah remembered living alone with her mother in California, while Elizabeth was temporarily separated from Bart. She remembered attending first grade in San Diego, second grade in Long Beach, and third grade in Santa Monica. When the school terms ended, mother and daughter spent every day at the beach, and when Sarah kissed her mother's cheek, her Mom smelled of talc and sunshine. Elizabeth's skin was as soft as a rose petal. Sarah's carefree days in the “Golden State” were the only happy memories she had of her childhood.

Rolling down the window for a breath of fresh air, the blowing dust mixed with the perspiration on Sarah's face and she hastily rolled it back up. Her thoughts kept pace with the miles. Almost dying had changed the direction of Sarah's life; there were no AAA cards for that. No one else could die for her, so no one had the right to tell her how to live.

One minute Sarah fretted about Elizabeth or Bob and the next she worried about her health and where she was going to find money to live on. Bob had told her time and again that she was insecure and defensive—that her behavior was neurotic. Sarah giggled remembering a description she'd read: “Dr. Mayo of Mayo Clinic announced today: 'NORMAL' is a twenty-two-year-old male ministerial student in Iowa with an IQ of 102 and no sense of humor.” How boring.

What Sarah craved wasn't normalcy, but adventure and excitement. Her IQ was over 130 and she had her father's sense of humor—two more reasons she couldn't be “normal” by Dr. Mayo's standard. Neurosis might be a blessing rather than a curse. If Sarah hadn't acted “crazy” after her hysterectomy, she wouldn't have seen a therapist and might still be living with Bob; miserable but secure. Now she was miserable and insecure, filled with guilt and shame for no apparent reason. She felt rotten to the core.

Sarah reached for the paper bag on the seat beside her. She fumbled with the opening and pulled out an apple and a piece of cheese. She laid the apple on the bag and nibbled the cheese as she drove. No more restaurant stops, she'd given that up on the second day of driving when she paid for the meal she couldn't eat. Sarah drove on and on and on, her only stops: filling up the gas tank and emptying her bladder. The same endless driving, hour after hour.

Sarah, a stickler for rules and regulations, and afraid of authority, rarely exceeded the speed limit. If a sign warned, sixty-five miles per hour, she drove sixty-four. On the fifth day of driving, she was fed up with the rules of the road and pressed her foot hard on the accelerator. She watched the speedometer race toward seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five. As she sped along she hummed, “If they could see me now . . .” The open stretch of highway gave her a false sense of security, and her mind buzzed with Father Mike's parting words, “I love Bob, too, but he's an enigma. He changed after his father's death. That's when I stopped coming to the house. Your warm hospitality couldn't cover the underlying tension. You're still plugged into him emotionally. Let go for your own

sake, Sarah. Let go or you'll never have the peace you deserve. Remember, when you're pushed into a corner, doors will open you never dreamed possible.”

Sarah pushed in the cigarette lighter, the unlit cigarette dangling from her lips as she considered Father Mike's words. Bob had pushed her into a corner and now look where she was. Driving like a maniac, breaking every speed limit. She'd played it safe all her life and that hadn't worked. Now she was risking her life. What difference did it make? She'd already lost her husband, her home, her faith.

She took a long drag on her cigarette and thought about faith. Father had said faith was a gift. Well, she'd lost that gift with her second operation. During the Kansas tornado she'd prayed and asked God for protection. Did that mean her faith had been restored? Sarah smiled wryly and thought, yes, thank God, I can pray again. “Lose something, gain something.”

Goofy from lack of sleep, Sarah braked when she saw water on the road ahead. Then she realized it couldn't be water, not with the sun shining so brightly. It must be a mirage. So was life.

At eighty-five miles an hour, the sign rushed at her, DETOUR, before she was fully aware. SLOW. CONSTRUCTION AHEAD. Sarah jammed her foot hard and braked as the car skidded and ground on the gravel that had abruptly replaced cement. The car swerved out of control as the rear tire roared and flew across the highway. The car groaned and rattled as Sarah regained control and eased the car to a full stop.

She stood on the gravel beside the car, shaking in disbelief as she looked at the tireless rim. Before she had time to consider her next step, Sarah heard “Lady?” and looked up to see a car pulled to a stop behind the Pontiac and a stranger walking toward her.

“Hey, lady, you really handled that car. I couldn't have done better myself. Let me help you. Where's your spare?”

Everything in the hatchback had to be removed before Sarah's savior could reach the jack. The man didn't complain and refused Sarah's offer of money. She thanked him

profusely, climbed back in the car, and drove more slowly than the speed limit required. God *was* watching over her. Thanks-be-to-God, the U-Haul wasn't dragging behind or the car would have turned over when the tire ruptured. Sarah blew air through her teeth. First the storm and then a blow-out! She'd handled those emergencies damn well for a novice. The stranger had said she'd handled the car with competence, and she had.

Bart would have been pleased to know his daughter took after him. Sarah remembered when her father had been at the wheel and the Hudson had gone out of control. Three car tires had blown—pop-pop-pop—and one tire on the trailer behind it had exploded. The car had weaved from one side of the road to the other, and a semi-truck barely missed them. Sarah had sat on a small stool near a desert cactus and watched and listened while other drivers stopped and remarked to Bart, “You really handled that car. We thought you were goners.”

After another long day of driving, Sarah checked into a motel at 10:00 P.M., the earliest she'd stopped since leaving Vanderville. She felt certain she'd reach California the following day without driving half the night. She handed over eight dollars to the slovenly desk clerk in the seedy lobby and, under her breath, cursed Bob. “You bastard, you wouldn't be caught dead in a hole like this.”

Gripping her room key, she re-parked the car in front of an ugly gray stucco building, still fuming, now at herself rather than Bob. If she hadn't spent all her malpractice settlement on others she wouldn't be staying in this disgusting motel. She'd given her mother a round-trip ticket to Europe, and Louise and Ben a round trip ticket to Jamaica. She wasn't sorry about that; Louise deserved a break from the kids. She'd repaid Bob for the money he'd spent on her hospitalization. The only malpractice money she'd spent on herself was a round trip ticket to Tokyo. She'd befriended a young Japanese student at Penland and he'd invited her to visit. His family had showered Sarah with attention.

She didn't resent the money she'd spent on others, including the new sewing machine for John's wife and the money she'd given Josh to expedite his move to California.

Sighing, Sarah limped out of the car, her legs stiff from sitting in one position for so long. She dragged her suitcase up the stairs to her room and stared at a stained yellow chenille bedspread dipping in puckered lumps over the sagging mattress. Frowning in disgust, she hoisted her suitcase to the bed. The spread was so filthy, it would probably stain her suitcase. She felt stained, too. Hearing the drip-drip-drip of a leaky shower, Sarah poked her head into the bathroom. Unwilling to step foot in the filthy shower, she threw herself, fully dressed, face down on the disgusting spread and sobbed. She'd been a good wife. Bob would send for her. She fell asleep in the same position, her bed companion the unopened suitcase.

Sarah found no repose, even in sleep. She dreamed she was a passenger on a roller coaster. Each seat was shaped like a couch. She snuggled close to Bob and pleaded, "Bob, please hold on to me. Hold me. I'm afraid I'll fall." In Sarah's dream, as in her life, Bob refused. He pushed her to the edge of the couch as the roller coaster picked up speed and careened down a big S curve. Sarah flew into space, screaming, "It's your fault, Bob. I begged you to hold me." Sarah spun in dream-space surrounded by nebulous numbers floating in the air. The number five faded in and out, as Bob jeered, "That's the ride, Baby!"

Sarah awoke from her nightmare feeling disoriented. The dream haunted her as she splashed cold water on her face—there was no hot water. She brushed her teeth and spat blood into the cracked bowl. She was sure her gums were diseased and she had no money for a dentist. Gingerly, she wiped her mouth on a thread-bare, dirty gray towel and consoled herself. This poverty was only temporary. Bob would send for her. He'd come to his senses.

Sarah smoothed down the wrinkled jeans she'd slept in and changed to a clean blouse. She smeared on lipstick, brushed her hair, and lugged her suitcase off the bed. A

Gideon Bible on the dresser caught her attention as she headed for the door. She dropped the suitcase, picked up the Bible, closed her eyes, and opened the book at random. She pointed her finger at a passage, opened her eyes, and read: “The beauty of a woman cheereth the countenance of her husband, and a man desireth nothing more. If she have a tongue that can cure, and likewise mitigate and show mercy: her husband is not like other men. He that possesseth a good wife, beginneth a possession: she is a help like to himself, and a pillar of rest.”

Sarah closed the Bible, stood with her eyes closed in the despicable room, feeling she'd received a message.

Without stopping for so much as a cup of tea, Sarah drove into the mountains. The twisting road required all her attention, and she was terrified, afraid to look away from the road. She kept a light foot on the accelerator, and the speedometer dropped to twenty miles an hour. She drove with caution and fear, as cars lined up behind her, honked, and tail-gated. Sarah ignored the impatient honking and white-knuckled the steering wheel, slowing her speed even more. As she approached the valley, she bravely drove thirty-five miles an hour. At the first opportunity, she pulled to the side of the road, shivering in fear, while cars passed, the drivers waving their fists and shouting through open windows. “Stay the hell off the road, lady, till you learn how to drive.” She turned off the ignition and slumped in her seat. She'd always been terrified of driving in the mountains, even as a passenger. Sarah used to beg and plead with Bob to slow down. He'd tell her to calm down and stop acting irrational. Pressing her knuckles to her nose, Sarah wondered why she felt so terrified. When had this irrational fear begun?

Then she remembered.

Bart sat high on his pillow in the driver's seat, his foot heavy on the accelerator as the Hudson careened down the twisting mountain road. The road, barely wide enough for two cars, had no guard rail, no protection from the sheer drop to the valley below. El, in the front seat next to him, pleaded, “Please, Bart, please slow down.”

Bart kept his eyes on the road as he shouted back, "Shut up! I don't want that man dying in the back seat of my car!"

"Bart, please, I beg you. Slow down, or we'll all be dead."

Six-year-old Sarah, afraid to look out the window, worried that another car might approach as the Hudson turned another rock-carved corner at high speed. Hunched over double in the back seat, Sarah's legs and feet were tucked under her cotton dress as she watched the newspapers under the man's body turn crimson, his blood spreading across the newsprint. Blood squirted from a jagged rip in the man's forehead. It dripped from his lips and matted his hairy chest. Her eyes remained fixed on the man's blood-stained shirt, all the buttons missing. She listened to his moans and to her parents quarreling in the front seat.

Sarah, hunched over the wheel of the Pontiac as she'd once hunched over that dying man, knew with certainty that that's when her fear of mountain driving had begun. She covered her face with her hands, as she relived the terror of watching a man die. She'd witnessed violent death long before her father's murder. She held her hands atop her head as if willing total recall, and the full sequence of that horrifying experience surfaced.

She remembered the jolt as the Hudson skidded to an abrupt stop to avoid the overturned hay wagon and an upended Ford jalopy. She remembered a man shouting at Bart, "You've got to take this man to a hospital. If you don't, he'll die, and you'll have that on your conscience for the rest of your life." She remembered her father's reluctance, then his frantic whisper: "El, put a thick layer of newspaper on the floor of the back seat. I don't want that guy bleeding all over my new car." Sarah relived the horror of watching the man bleed to death as the Hudson hurtled down the twisted mountain road. She remembered when the man stopped moaning, when his eyes no longer blinked. She remembered the orderlies rushing out to the car, and the emergency room doctor announcing, "Dead on arrival."

Still slumped over the steering wheel, Sarah gasped and shuddered as she curled up like an embryo on the front seat and sobbed. When the inner storm abated, she sat up, blew her nose and took a deep breath, as she quieted her wiggling right wrist with her left hand. Then she remembered the first dead body she'd ever seen and her agitation began all over again.

A man's body, blue and bloated, lay on the sand like a swollen fish. Silver scales covered the nude torso and the trousered legs. The stench of decaying flesh filled the air as a crowd of curiosity seekers gathered near the body. Sarah, walking near the Long Beach shoreline, saw the corpse and watched as a police officer covered the body with a sheet. She heard his words, "Why don't people pay attention? Last week's tidal wave must have swept this man off the bridge."

Sarah sat up, ran her fingers through her hair, turned the key in the ignition, and gripped the steering wheel. The irony; her mother never allowed her to read comic books—they were too violent, yet Sarah had experienced more violence in her youth than most people did in a lifetime. Shaking her head from side to side, Sarah tried to regain her equilibrium. She had to pull herself together or she'd never reach California before nightfall. She raised her arm, whiffed her armpit, and swore she'd soak in a tub of hot water tonight to celebrate the end of this nightmarish trip.

At the first break in traffic, Sarah eased the car back on the road. Needing a break from her thoughts of doom and gloom, she turned on the radio. She tapped her finger against the steering wheel, keeping time to "Do know the way to San Jose ..." and rejoiced. Tonight she'd sleep in her own apartment.

The last two hundred miles to the California border were uneventful. Near exhaustion, Sarah drove on, filled with the prospect of seeing orange groves and blooming flowers. At the border, she willingly turned in her lunch bag of cheese and fruit; but, when the border patrol officer asked, "Do you have any plants?" she denied it.

She drove across the California border, her one plant safely hidden in the back seat, too tired to even fault herself for lying.

Sarah's euphoria lasted until she drove the freeway between Long Beach and San Pedro, and her daydreams of flowering landscapes were shattered. To the left of the highway, oil rigs pumped up and down, up and down, like perpetual motion machines. On the right, oil rigs pumped in vacant lots, in back yards, and between the houses. Oil rigs had replaced the orange groves. Sneering in disgust, Sarah had to laugh as she viewed the work of some free spirit. Someone had painted faces on several rigs; the mouths looked as if they were opening and closing with the up and down motion of the pumps. Up and down, up and down. That was the story of Sarah's life.

Sarah reminisced as she drove the last twenty miles to San Pedro. Were there any orange groves left? She wondered. Did sailors still swarm the boardwalk? She remembered those jolly sailors, the tattoos on their arms wiggling as they walked. She ground out another cigarette in the overflowing ashtray and remembered the cigarette butts that lined the boardwalk and looked like candy bars attacked by ants.

One hand on the steering wheel, Sarah fumbled with her change purse, opened it with one hand, pulled the wadded bills to the steering wheel, and counted what remained of her \$150. She glanced between the highway and the bills. "Wooppee!" Not eating in restaurants and sleeping in pits had paid off. She had \$55 left. Tonight she would treat herself to a first class motel and celebrate her arrival with a full-course dinner. Tomorrow morning was soon enough to face the apartment. She wanted to sleep in a bed tonight, not a sleeping bag on the floor.

At dusk, Sarah drove into San Pedro. The twinkling lights of refineries pierced the growing darkness. The lights near the docks looked romantic and for a moment Sarah forgot that the refineries represented grime and thermos jugs that smelled of sour milk. She overlooked the decay beneath the twinkling lights as she had when she drove between Hegewisch and South Chicago.

San Pedro's numbered streets gave Sarah comfort. She knew Second Street would follow First. At the traffic light, she watched a man exit a drug store, and she caught her breath. The stranger looked so much like her father. San Pedro seemed familiar, and much to Sarah's amazement, she felt as if she'd arrived home.

CHAPTER 17

San Pedro, where longshoremen rubbed elbows with housemaids. The men worked the docks and the maids polished furniture in posh Palos Verdes. Palos Verdes, where the professionals lived, and San Pedro, the town the blue-collar workers called home, were culturally miles apart while the physical distance between the two communities was a mere ten miles.

Sarah could have lived in Long Beach, Santa Monica or Venice, the places she remembered from her childhood, but she chose San Pedro because she didn't feel lost there. The streets were numbered as they were in Vanderville: 2nd Street followed 1st Street and Main Street seemed familiar to her when she recognized Woolworth's and Newberry's. Years later, Sarah laughed when she learned that she'd moved into a historic San Pedro area called, "whiskey flats." Sarah would meet new people, but they were the same cast of characters. Unconsciously, she'd chosen San Pedro, a relic of the thirties, where she could retrace her life.

In October when Sarah had searched for an apartment, she'd stopped at a San Pedro real estate office and met, "Please call me Gilda." Gilda, dressed like a B-girl in high heels and slacks, looked tough, until she smiled. Gilda needed a bleach, and Sarah had pegged her as a divorcee. Sarah always recognized Bob's divorcee clients by their need of a bleach and the tight set of their lips. Sarah hoped she'd never look like Gilda.

Gilda's features softened as she smiled. Setting her listing book aside, she said, "I think I have just the apartment for you. It's not listed yet, since the remodeling isn't finished. The landlord is a friend of mine. I'll give him a call and see what he thinks about showing you the apartment before it's finished."

Twenty minutes later, Gilda and Sarah met Bill at the curb in front of a freshly painted California bungalow. Sarah was pleased with the house's exterior and thought it had possibilities, but it was a house not an apartment, and she felt confused.

Bill waved his arm to her as she stood in front of the house and said, "No, that's not it. I've finished that. Follow me." He led Sarah and the realtor down a long, narrow driveway, past the house to the back of the lot and stopped in front of a three-car garage, new lumber piled high in front of two of the three closed garage doors.

The minuscule yard behind the house filled Sarah with misgiving. Her stomach turned over as she eyed empty beer cans, weeds, newspapers, and other debris. Incongruously above the litter, freshly laundered clothing hung from a rope and flapped in a mild breeze.

The landlord waved his arm at the trash and said, "Don't worry about this. I'll have it all cleaned up before you move in. You do want to rent around December 1st, right?"

"First, I'll have to see the apartment."

"Well, yeah, sure," Bill said, as he led the two women up a flight of twenty steps to an apartment built above the three-car garage. Sarah noticed the banister peeling with three shades of old paint and considered retreating down the steps.

With room for only one on the small landing, Sarah held back on the top step. Bill turned the key in the lock, waved the women inside, and said, "I'm almost finished with this upstairs apartment."

The tiny vestibule inside the front door was filled with light and sunshine as Sarah entered and her attitude changed from revulsion to delight. She wanted to like this apartment, she'd viewed so many, she needed her living arrangements settled before she flew back to Chicago the following day.

Sarah stepped on the beige wall-to-wall carpeting, newly laid in the small two-by-four living room. She viewed the walnut paneling and it reminded her of the rec-room in

Vanderville. A fake fireplace in the corner looked cheerful when Bill twisted the gas jet and real flames magically appeared.

She checked out the tiny kitchen, the freshly painted white walls, and the window over the sink; the window Sarah had dreamed of her whole married life.

“What about kitchen appliances?” she asked. “Do you supply them?”

“Sure, they're ordered, but they haven't arrived yet. You'll have a new stove and fridge.”

“Fine. What's the bathroom like?”

“I just installed a brand-new shower.”

Sarah smiled at Gilda and Bill and said, “This might work, but there is one problem. The apartment is too small for art projects.” The whole apartment had less space than her bedroom in Vanderville.

“I've saved the best for last,” the realtor and landlord said in unison. “Follow me.”

Down the long flight of stairs, and past the broken beer bottles, Bill opened a side door into the garage. Sarah found herself standing at the entrance of a dark, cavernous space.

“Wait here,” Bill said. “I'll turn on the lights. The electricity was just installed yesterday.” He pulled a light cord from a single bare bulb, centered on the nearly seven-foot high ceiling. “Sarah, may I call you Sarah? Now that I'm almost finished upstairs, I'll be able to concentrate down here. If you have any suggestions, I'll be happy to consider them.”

The empty space seemed enormous and was divided into several areas. Sarah really lucked out. She'd have a room for painting and one for sculpture.

“Well, Bill, I'll need running water and a laundry sink to wash my brushes. I'll need a lot more light. And a few built-ins would be nice.”

It was too dark for Sarah to read the landlord's frown, but she recognized his change of tone when he said, "I'll put in water and light, but no built-ins. This isn't a custom job for you, you know."

Ms. Innocence of 1973, as Sarah later dubbed herself, had a lot to learn. She wrote out a check for \$350 to cover first and last month's rent plus the \$100 security/clean-up deposit. Bill reassured her that the apartment, studio, and yard would be clean and ready for her arrival in December. The rent, \$125 a month, seemed too much for her budget, but she'd have lots of space for the money. Once the apartment was furnished with a few sticks of furniture from Vanderville, it would be satisfactory. When the backyard rubbish was removed, she could plant a flower garden.

In San Pedro, palm trees swayed in the ocean breeze and the lawns in the neighborhood were freshly manicured. Sarah, in her innocence, thought she'd rented an apartment in a safe residential area.

On December 8th, Sarah picked up the keys from Gilda, who assured her that everything was ready for her arrival; the apartment and yard in good condition. She drove away from the realtor's office feeling very grown up and ready to move into her first apartment as a single. She thought she could be happy there, at least until Bob came to rescue her.

Sarah parked the Pontiac six feet from the garage to avoid the newly stacked lumber. The lumber piled next to the driveway had already changed color from being left out in the elements for months. The rubbish in the backyard was piled even higher and the peeling banister revealed yet another color of paint.

Inside the apartment Sarah was shocked when she realized the paneling was fake; hung by chance and four corner nails. In the kitchen, she gasped in horror at a half-sized, used and chipped white refrigerator. The stove, too, was at least twenty years old.

Biting her lip, Sarah removed one heavy carton from the car and lugged it up the stairs, one step at a time. Back and forth from car to apartment, Sarah's apprehension and anger increased and she mumbled repeatedly, "That lying bastard, he's just like Bob."

Retrieving the last box from the Pontiac, Sarah felt eyes on her back. She turned toward the front house in time to see her neighbor back away from the window, the shade swinging as she dropped it. Sarah hoped the noisy neighbor would be friendly; after all, they had to share the rubble-strewn yard.

Pushing the last cardboard box over the threshold, Sarah closed the front door (the only door to the apartment) and collapsed on her back, her body sinking into the wall-to-wall carpeting. She laid there motionless and unthinking for a moment or two. Then she put her palms under her back, swung her legs up and held them over her head. "I made it!" she chortled, dropping her legs back to the carpet.

She stretched out for a few minutes and counted her blessings: the sleeping bag and her stereo had been packed in the car. She might have laid there indefinitely if she hadn't wanted a cigarette. If the stores closed before she replenished her supply, she'd really be devastated.

Minutes later Sarah backed the empty Pontiac out of the long driveway, avoiding the odd pieces of lumber that had slipped from the side pile. She had no sense of direction, and only realized she wasn't headed for town when she saw the ocean. What the hell, so she was lost. Who cared. The ocean was one of the reasons Sarah had moved to California. She could stay lost as long as she wanted, she no longer had to answer to anyone.

Like a delighted child, Sarah hummed at the thought of her car windows rolled down in December. She adored the flowers in bloom; lavenders, pinks, and fuschia clung to rock gardens on her right, and the blue Pacific on her left. This vision of beauty beat the hell out of dirty, melting snow. The crack of the surf thrilled her as she watched giant waves break in irregular patterns against the craggy boulders below.

Sarah drove along the Pacific Coast Highway for several miles and to her delight, she spied a parking area and wooden steps that led down to the ocean. After parking the car, she hopped out, eager to investigate. At the bottom of two flights of wooden steps, she discovered a secluded beach covered with fine white sand, small pebbles, and assorted shells. The tide was out and she immediately pocketed a few chosen abalone shells to decorate her apartment.

Sitting on a flat-topped boulder, Sarah removed her tennis shoes and wiggled her toes in the sand. She watched a sea gull swoop low over the water, shrieking as its wings skimmed the water. It sounded like a lost soul searching for its mate.

After a time Sarah realized, in amazement, that she had been sitting very still. Completely still. Not wiggling, or twisting her neck, or snuffing her nose. Not coughing, or blinking her eyes. All the tics of her youth had returned during the two thousand mile drive from Vanderville to San Pedro, and now they were gone.

Looking at the horizon stretching for miles to the right and left, Sarah noticed the blue of the Pacific Ocean blended with the blue of the sky, a fine line separating one from the other. No traffic, no houses, no people. Reveling in the warm sunshine that caressed her closed eyes, Sarah felt at peace. After a while she glanced at her watch and decided that she'd better get moving. She needed to find a grocery store before they all closed.

The coast road curved around the peninsula and now Sarah could see the blue Pacific on both sides of the car. At the next intersection she turned right, away from the ocean and within minutes she saw a large sign on the left, *Hughes Market*. The architecture was similar to the Munster grocery store where she'd shopped for years. This building, however, was twice the size. Everything in California seemed larger than life.

Sarah parked between the white grid marks that divided the asphalt spaces and momentarily slumped over the wheel. She hated grocery shopping. She had for years. Her attitude changed, however, when she entered the well-lit, wide aisled mall that preceded the entrance to the grocery department. She rushed past the open area boutique;

she didn't have money for the garish blouses and cheap skirts, let alone the matching cashmere sweaters and skirts.

Unable to resist temptation in the plant section, Sarah chose a small philodendron and a three-foot dieffenbachia. Then she pushed her cart past rows of neatly lined canned goods and added a few necessities to her shopping cart.

Moving into the gourmet section, she forgot her limited budget and filled her cart with California artichoke hearts, Swedish butter crackers, and pimentos from Israel.

In the produce section she selected a pint of fresh strawberries—their size amazed her. The clean, oversized mushrooms were irresistible and so were the out-of-season apricots and mangoes. Sarah filled her cart to overflowing, forgetting she was now shopping for one.

She left the cart near the fish department long enough to find paper plates, plastic picnic utensils, and one small inexpensive frying pan. When she returned she ordered a slice of fresh salmon. Sarah, a midwesterner, had thought salmon only came in cans.

At the bakery counter she ordered a loaf of white bread, two sweet rolls, and a dozen cookies. She held one carton of Salems under her arm as she headed for the check-out counter; there was no more room in her shopping cart.

The smiling clerk said, “Good afternoon, Mrs.,” and Sarah didn't bother to correct her. She smiled until the register totaled her bill: \$55.25. Too embarrassed to remove anything from the packed brown paper bags, Sarah dug deep into her purse and scrounged for her new checkbook, grateful she'd opened a checking account in October.

After loading the groceries into the trunk of the hatchback, Sarah slipped into the driver's seat, crossed her arms over the steering wheel, buried her face and wept until the front of her blouse was drenched. She knew this was the last time she'd shop without counting every penny and she hated Bob anew for her lack of funds. Sniffing, as anger replaced tears, she gripped the steering wheel tightly. At least she wouldn't have to beg that bastard for money anymore—a woman her age on an allowance. How ridiculous. Bob had promised to send her \$140 a week; would she have to beg for that?

A car pulled in beside Sarah's. Unwilling to be seen with mascara running down her cheeks, she quickly blew her nose and started the motor. Like a woman she backed out, both hands on the wheel, her head twisting right and left to watch for traffic. Men always had one hand on the wheel, their right elbow perched on the back of the seat as they backed out. Men had power. And money.

Circling the lot to locate the exit, Sarah was momentarily confused as she drove onto a side street. She shook her head in confusion then recognized the adjacent main street, aware that she would have to reverse her direction to find "home."

At the foot of the hill she saw the ocean and turned left. On the fifteen-minute drive back to her apartment, the ocean could have been cement for all she cared, her mind was focused elsewhere.

"Don't disturb Daddy, he's worked hard all week." Sarah hushed the twelve-year-old twins, just as Elizabeth had hushed her when Bart slept late. "Eat your breakfast," she said as she climbed the stairs carrying Bob's Sunday breakfast on a tray. The tray, decorated with a fresh zinnia from the garden and a linen napkin, also held orange juice (the glass frosted like a root beer mug), crisp bacon, eggs over easy, and piping hot coffee, freshly brewed. Later she re-climbed the stairs to retrieve the tray and found Bob in the adjoining bathroom washing his feet in the sink.

"For Pete's sake, we've got two showers and a bathtub. Why are you washing your feet in the sink?"

"I guess it's just a carryover from living with four sisters and one bathroom," he laughed.

"And while I'm asking questions, I finally convinced you your shirts belong in the hamper not dropped on the floor, but why do you always leave the shirt-tail hanging out?"

Bob chuckled, "Never know when I'll have to retrieve it and wear it again like I did when I was a kid."

An hour later, Bob wore his navy-blue suit with the narrow lapels; his white oxford cloth, button-down shirt; and the navy straw hat to Sunday mass. No one would have dreamed he'd washed his feet in the sink.

In church no one would have believed that Sarah was trembling beneath her cotton stuffed bra, tight girdle, and white linen suit, her hands perspiring inside her white cotton gloves. The other Sunday morning parishioners only saw a handsome man and woman with their two handsome sons, dressed as small versions of their father.

By Sunday evening Sarah had a chance to relax in bed with the rumpled Sunday papers. Her makeup smeared from a day of fixing a big dinner, bringing cold drinks to Bob as he weeded the back yard, and keeping constant tabs on the boys' activities. She was too frazzled to do anything but hear Bob's words as she headed up the stairs. "Put the notebook on the credenza; I'll get to it later." She was too tired to argue that she wanted her allowance now. Backing up, she placed the notebook on the credenza, climbed the stairs, and plopped into bed to read the morning paper.

Bob opened the spiral notebook and looked at Sarah's itemized list of weekly expenses:

Groceries, \$35.00

Boys Haircuts, \$2.50

Beauty Shop, \$15.00

Maid, \$20.00

Personal Money, \$5.00

Shoes for Johnny, \$18.50

Druggist, \$16.76

Misc., \$20.00

"Sarah!" Bob shouted, "come down here!"

Sarah flinched at the sound of his voice, put down the book review of *The Split-Level Trap*, and walked down the stairs.

"Yes, Bob?"

“What the hell is this twenty dollars for miscellaneous?”

“I went shopping in the Loop.”

“What the hell; twenty dollars to go downtown?”

“Yes. Train fare. Lunch. The Art Institute and shopping were about fifteen dollars, and then I had to buy incidentals.”

“What incidentals?”

“Kotex!”

Now she'd blown it. She no longer needed sanitary pads and Bob knew it. They'd fight, there would be no movie tonight, and no sex.

Bob threw the spiral notebook on the floor, and Sarah retreated to bed, mumbling to herself, “Bastard, you spend more than that every week on booze.”

Sarah found her way back to the apartment and lugged the six grocery bags up the steps, one at a time. Where were the twins when she needed them? Breathing hard from the weight of the bags, she forgot the boys had left home years ago and she'd been the one who'd emptied the car.

Joylessly, Sarah unpacked the grocery bags, aware that she had purchased far too much for one person. The ancient fridge was already leaking water across the linoleum as she forced in the eggs, butter, and milk. The fresh vegetables remained in their cellophane bags and Sarah stored them in the toilet tank, the place she'd stored candy and fruit when she was in college.

She emptied the large carton of painting supplies she'd brought from Vanderville, turned the box upside down, and placed a packing cloth over it. Locating the paper plates and plastic forks she'd purchased, Sarah set the table for one.

The smell of fresh salmon grilling on the stove had Sarah's mouth watering. The frozen french fried potatoes browning in the oven looked good, too. Sarah actually looked forward to her first meal in her own place.

The fake fireplace shadowed rosy-fingered patterns on the fake paneling as Sarah carried her dinner into the living room. Her new, green plants, already placed near the curtainless windows, almost gave her a feeling of home. She wished she'd packed her records in the car. Listening to classical music while she ate would be pleasurable.

She sat on the carpet in front of the makeshift table and lifted her fork. She took one bite of salmon and then gagged with the revulsion of eating alone. She was pathetic in her loneliness. Bob would have criticized her cooking, if he were there, but at least she wouldn't be in isolation. She felt like throwing the plate through the window, and she might have if the plate hadn't been paper.

Five minutes to five. Sarah, in her up-to-date, well applanced kitchen, cut potatoes in small pieces, which would be served later water-soaked and lumpy-mashed. She no longer cared about cooking; every meal was criticized.

At 6:00 P.M. sharp, Bob sat at the head of the table, his elbows on the white linen cloth, waiting for Sarah to serve his dinner. The napkin next to his plate remained untouched. The nine-year-old twins sitting across from one another had their hands and their napkins in their laps. Sarah had trained them well.

Dinner served, Sarah slid into her chair at the end of the table and laughed along with Johnny at Josh's recital of a school mishap. “. . .and a dog got in our classroom, and Sister sprinkled it with Holy water and . . .”

“Damn it, Sarah!” Bob exploded. “You can't even mash potatoes. They're full of lumps.”

Frightened by the uproar, Johnny accidentally knocked over his milk glass, and the white liquid penetrated the tablecloth. The acid in Sarah's stomach burned as Bob's next victim caught his wrath.

“Damn it, John, you're not a baby anymore—grow up!” Bob barked as he helped sop up the spill with his napkin.

“Don't make a fuss, Bob. It's okay, I'll clean it up.”

“It is NOT okay! If he doesn't learn discipline and manners at home, where will he.”

Bob's neck muscles expanded, his eyes bulged, and his sharp tone cut through their midst like a razor's edge while the twins' heads hovered over their plates and Sarah wriggled in her chair, swallowing hard.

On the morning of Sarah's second day in San Pedro, she stood at the kitchen sink and looked out the window. The litter and debris below that swelled the space between her apartment and the house in front was obscured. All she could see was the top of a palm tree; the red-gold center reaching into the green as the tree swayed in the mild breeze and the sun cast shadows on the dancing fronds. The shape of the trunk looked like a fresh pineapple and the hills behind the palm, dotted with rooftops, reminded Sarah of Greece. She reveled in the beauty, certain that after the holidays she'd be out of isolation.

“Watch out world, here comes Sarah,” she laughed, as she walked to the bedroom and grabbed her jacket off the bed. The jacket, a castoff of Josh's, had a patch on one arm that read: “Don't eat yellow snow.”

Determined to find downtown San Pedro, and not get lost as she had the day before, she turned left rather than right at the intersection. When she located Gaffey Street, the store façades reminded her of Hammond, Indiana in the thirties.

Sarah parked at the local Safeway and went inside to purchase two dish towels. She discovered that the prices for groceries and cigarettes were more expensive in San Pedro than in posh Palos Verdes, and she made an immediate decision to continue shopping at the Hughes Market. The money she'd save on the price difference would pay for the gas. She was accustomed to class, and the San Pedro Safeway was definitely inferior.

After her errand, Sarah drove to the ocean path she'd located the day before. She sat on *her* boulder and regained the peace of yesterday. After resting for ten minutes, she

pocketed a few shells and then headed up the long stairway, determined to investigate P.V. more thoroughly.

She felt like an old pro as she drove past the *Hughes Market*. Several miles further on she discovered a modern shopping mall. She didn't dare stop for fear she'd impulsively buy something.

At the next gas station, Sarah stopped and asked for directions to the local library. Once there, she registered for a library card and gave an assumed address that she'd noted on her way. She felt naughty about her lie, but it was necessary. She'd already investigated the two dusty rooms, torn book covers, and the bespectacled, tight-lipped librarian at the San Pedro Library. No way would she use that one.

Proving her reliability was difficult without identification, but she offered her new savings account passbook. "You don't have one credit card?" the woman behind the desk asked.

"No, not yet," Sarah smiled. "I only moved here two days ago. Reading is very important to me. I promise I'll take very good care of your books and return them on time."

Sarah received her library card. The fashionable library had an ample selection of classical records and Sarah chose a half-dozen. She checked them out along with two biography's, one book of poetry, and three books on the psychology of living alone.

She anticipated settling down in her new living room, lighting the fire, and listening to Beethoven or Brahms while she read without interruption. No Bob there to say, "You're reading again? You're so lazy."

CHAPTER 18

The fireplace in Sarah's San Pedro living room traced patterns on the walls, but it generated no heat. Sarah layered a sweater over her sweatshirt and under her jean jacket. She plugged in the hi-fi; grateful it had been packed in her car when she left Vanderville. She placed the needle on a Stravinsky record on the turntable and settled down on her sleeping bag, a bed pillow she'd purchased under her head. She raised the library edition of Gibran's *The Prophet*, opened the book at random, and read:

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.

And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.

And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.

She lowered the open book to her stomach, the music drifting in and out of her consciousness as she contrasted the difference between silence and solitude, loneliness and despair. Now she could read and think with no mother or husband to scold her.

On the fourth day in her new home, Sarah realized she hadn't spoken to anyone in forty-eight hours, not even a sales clerk. Talking to them was better than nothing, so she headed to her car. Before she slid behind the wheel, she peeled off her jean jacket. It was warmer outside than it was in her apartment.

She drove to the Woolworth's on Gaffey Street and parked near the entrance. Entering the dime store, Sarah felt like a nine-year-old as childhood memories of Hammond's Woolworth's engulfed her. The ribbon counter on the second floor looked the same as it had so long ago, and Sarah smiled at the similarities as she purchased a yard of blue satin ribbon as a memento.

Back in her apartment, Sarah realized that she'd only spoken a few words to break her silence. Needing to express herself, she decided to write to Bob. She didn't hate him; in fact, she loved him and hoped that he'd come to California to reclaim her. She wrote a long letter describing her apartment and the travail of her drive west, including the tornado and blown out tire. She signed her letter, "With love."

Bob did not respond, he did, however, mail her a birthday card and a check for \$5.00. The card arrived on December 16th, the day after her birthday. She read the hand-written note at the bottom, "Sorry it can't be more, but I'm short of cash," and she chose to believe him.

Elizabeth had sent her a card and a check for \$10.00. With her birthday money, Sarah allowed herself the pleasure of going to the Palos Verdes shopping center. She bought herself one yellow rose, which meant more to her than the dozens of red ones Bob had once sent. She walked round and round the bookstore before she decided to buy *How to be Your Own Best Friend*. Then she rushed back to her car; the Christmas decorations felt like a personal affront, and reminded her of the past.

Back in her apartment she settled down to read her birthday book and was surprised when the phone rang. The twins had already called to wish her a happy birthday. She thought she'd sounded cheerful; she'd sounded hysterical. This call, another from her mother to celebrate her forty-fourth birthday.

As the days passed, the shock of separation from Bob had progressed into a euphoria of romantic optimism. While Sarah added homey touches—more plants, shells, and stones—to her environment, she daydreamed about her future. She felt certain that after the holidays she'd meet people and make friends.

On her second visit to the Hughes Market, Sarah kept her purchases to a minimum and read every notice on the store bulletin board. Later she called two of the numbers listed for "Baby-sitter Wanted," and landed her first paying assignments sitting for the children of a doctor and a lawyer.

During the day she roamed San Pedro or sat on *her* rock and stared at the ocean. She'd read or skim each book she checked out of the library and her repeated trips replenished her supply. She read during the day and at night when she baby sat.

The doctor's wife had been cordial and Sarah enjoyed her children. The lawyer's wife treated Sarah like a paid servant. She told her emphatically to wash the dishes and make the beds. Sarah was a lawyer's wife and she'd never asked her sitters to wash a dish. She felt like walking out of Mrs. Burns's house and slamming the door behind her, but she stayed and did chores, wondering if she'd made a mistake leaving Bob.

By the end of the week, Sarah's name had been passed around, and strangers called, "You've been highly recommended. I'd like you to sit for . . ." and Sarah replied, "I'm not sitting anymore." There had to be another way to earn money, and after the holidays she'd find it.

On Christmas day, when the phone rates were reasonable, Sarah called Louise to wish her a merry and happy, and Lou let it slip, "Bob's in Vermont skiing. He won't return until after the first of the year." She found out later that he'd flown to New York, while she was driving to California, and had spent the rest of December in Vermont. Sarah was outraged that he could spend that kind of money while she was counting her pennies.

Bob had sent her a book on Duchamp for Christmas and she'd put it on her closet shelf without opening it. The red poinsettia she'd received from the twins added a touch of color to the living room and she reread their note, "We know you'll make it, Ma. We love you."

Sarah glanced at the clock, aware that if she were in Vanderville the twins would be with her, not sending a present. She hadn't missed decorating the house, baking, or standing in long lines to buy presents; what she missed was her family. She'd given her sons and her mother art work before she'd left, but hadn't given a gift to Bob. She felt guilty that he'd sent one to her.

Auguste Damai—her artist pen pal of three years—and his wife had invited Sarah to have Christmas dinner with them. Sarah was grateful she wouldn't have to spend the whole memory-filled day alone.

The dreaded holidays behind her, Sarah was more aware than ever that she hadn't moved into a quiet residential neighborhood. Into the middle of the night, she'd hear car engines groan, tires squeal, and horns blare. The rhythm of the street played counterpoint to the tick-tock, tick-tock of the alarm clock. It seemed to tick louder on those nights when Sarah couldn't sleep. Several times, around four in the morning, she heard firecrackers; later she learned they were shotgun blasts.

Sarah's first neighborhood lesson had come the week she'd moved in. On her evening walk after dinner, she watched a young couple empty a pick-up truck and carry belongings into the house next door. She walked up to them and introduced herself: “Hi, my name is Sarah Shallot.”

The man and woman looked at Sarah as if she were crazy. “Humph,” the man finally responded.

“Are you moving in?”

“Obviously.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. Naturally I can see that you are. I'm new in the neighborhood, too. Would you like to come to my apartment—it's only next door—and have a glass of wine?”

The couple looked at each other and raised their eyebrows, then looked at Sarah as if she'd insulted them.

“I'm sorry,” Sarah repeated. “Have I said something to offend you? I just thought that since we're both new in the neighborhood, you might like to come over.”

The couple stared at her without responding, then looked at each other again. Bewildered, Sarah backed away from the fence that divided them.

After several moments of silence, the man said, “Okay, lady. No harm in it. Come on Goldie, let's go have ourselves some wine.”

The couple silently followed Sarah up the long flight of stairs to her apartment. They entered and stared at her while she turned on the gas in the fireplace and invited them to sit down on the carpeting.

In the kitchen she struggled to open the first bottle of wine she had ever purchased for herself. She poured red Gallo into three water glasses and handed two of them to her guests. Still, the couple didn't speak, not even to say, thank you.

Perplexed and nervous, Sarah tittered as she filled the dead space with words and more words. With no response she finally gave up and sat staring back at the strangers, wondering why she'd invited them.

Finally the man said, “Lady, I've got to tell you something.”

“Sure.”

He rolled up the sleeve of his blue denim work shirt and pointed to a tattoo in the crook of his arm. “Do you know what this is?” he asked.

“Sure, it's a tattoo.”

“It's more than that, lady. It's a tattoo to cover my hash marks. I'm a reformed junkie, lady.” He turned to his female companion and said, “Tell her where your husband is, Goldie.”

“San Quentin.”

Now Sarah looked at the couple as if *they* were crazy. Still, she looked at them, not in fear, but with interest and curiosity.

“Lady, listen to me. You seem like a really nice person. When you asked us in for wine, we wondered what you wanted—what you were after. But lady, I see you are really naïve. If I were still on the stuff, tomorrow I'd be back when you weren't home, and I'd rip off your record player and anything else I could lay my hands on.” He waved his arm and took in the whole empty room. “Lady, believe me, I'm only telling you this because I really think you're okay. Get some drapes in this apartment, like right now.

Don't talk to anyone on the street. Keep your head down and don't look anyone in the eye. Don't ever talk to strangers in this neighborhood, and don't *ever* invite strangers into your apartment again.”

Sarah's breath escaped from her lungs like a tire going flat. A cold chill enveloped her like a shroud and she rubbed her arms. Even so, the goose bumps remained.

“We're leaving now, lady. Do like I said. Thanks for the wine.”

In the morning, Sarah went to Woolworth's and bought yards and yards of colored burlap and thumb tacks. In the afternoon, she tacked the burlap across her bedroom window. At dusk, from her porch on the second floor, she watched the couple carry out everything they had carried into the house the day before and drive off in their beat up pick-up truck. Now she knew the neighborhood was not as safe as she'd assumed, and she stopped taking walks after dinner.

Sunday after Sunday, Sarah scoured the *L.A. Times* looking for opportunities—any interesting activity where she might meet others. She hated the thought of once more becoming “a joiner.” In her twenties and thirties, she'd enthusiastically joined groups and was actively involved. Now she felt no enthusiasm, but knew she'd have to participate in some activity if she were to meet anyone.

In early January, Sarah, a devout Democrat, attended a meeting of candidates at a private home in Palos Verdes. The house looked like an upper middle-class residence; it was stylish and sumptuous. The swimming pool, the rock terrace, and all the hanging plants on the wooden deck looked to Sarah like a movie set. She thought Democrats in California were nothing like their Vanderville counterparts. In Vanderville, a Democratic do meant a summer potluck picnic and cases and cases of beer.

In mid-January, Sarah attended a NOW meeting in Palos Verdes. The meeting had been suggested to her when she'd called the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women during her first week in California.

Sarah looked forward to the evening for weeks, hopeful she would end her friendless solitary existence. She arrived early and found a seat next to a woman who'd smiled at her as she'd entered the meeting room. Sarah surveyed the matrons in their cashmere sweaters and patent leather wedgies and thought they all looked like women she'd known in her "lady of the manor" period. That night she felt embarrassed wearing her blue jeans and a pale blue sweater. After the meeting, the women who spoke to Sarah responded as if she were a heroine when they heard she'd left her marriage and driven across the country by herself. The women seemed threatened by Sarah's "bravery and courage"; they were still in the marriage trap that Sarah had escaped. Sarah decided she had nothing to learn at NOW and never attended another meeting.

The following week Sarah did attend a meeting in Palos Verdes for recently divorced, separated, or widowed women that had been announced at NOW.

Wearing her blue jeans again, Sarah felt more comfortably dressed this time. Gloria was the only name she remembered after meeting the nine women who attended. Glo was the woman who had cracked jokes all evening. She'd looked so small and fragile when she sat with her legs crossed in the circle the women had formed on the carpeting. When she stood to leave, her hips were so wide they looked as if they belonged to a much larger woman.

By mid-February Sarah and Gloria had a growing friendship, and they frequently stopped for coffee at a neighborhood deli after the meetings. Gloria was thirty-five and still lived in her marital home in Palos Verdes. She'd been a working mother for the last ten years of her now defunct marriage, and had separated from her husband in November, a few weeks before Sarah had arrived in California.

It seemed to Sarah that Gloria possessed more knowledge than she did about the single life, and had more ego and self-esteem. It didn't occur to her that Gloria had remained in her own environment, with her old friends, and had not forced herself into a new way of life that promoted insecurity. At this point in Sarah's life, she forgot her past accomplishments and felt *everyone* knew more about *everything* than she did.

Sarah admired Gloria, with her up-turned nose and red hair, and was floored when Glo confided that she was a Jew. She'd laughed when Sarah said, "I have a Sagittarian personality."

"No, you fool, you have a Jewish personality. That's why you're interested in growth and education. Jews read more books than any other ethnic group. Haven't you heard the joke about Jewish women being so busy collecting for charity they don't have time to get laid?"

When Glo threw Yiddish words into their conversation, Sarah was amazed that she understood their meaning. Then she remembered her father and mother had used Yiddish words like *shikseh* so the maid wouldn't know she was being talked about. If they didn't like something teen-age Sarah wore, they called it a *shmatte*.

When Bart complained about a patron of the DOG HOUSE who got on his nerves, he'd say, "I told the bastard to *kush mir in tuchas!*" He never said, "kiss my ass!" He'd scorn some customer by saying, "That bastard was so *shikker* he dropped his shot glass and whiskey spilled all over the bar. It's hard being around drunks night after night."

Sarah schmoozed with her first Jewish friend, enjoying her more each time they met. She thought Gloria was bright, witty, and intelligent. She admired Gloria because she earned a weekly paycheck as a part-time court reporter and mothered her ten-year-old daughter at the same time.

The displaced women who met weekly labeled themselves the "misfits." "We don't fit into marriage, and we don't fit into single life," they all agreed.

All the women in the group were recently separated. No divorced or widowed women showed up for the meetings. Sarah looked forward to the weekly event and the growing openness between the eight regulars. The women, in their shared pain, learned from one another. Sarah, wanting to be liked, rarely disclosed her personal pain, but did ask intense questions as if there were one definitive answer to any problem. She thought

if she learned the “all-inclusive answer” from an “authority” her problems would be resolved.

Sarah's role of choice was one of comedian and entertainer. She became more spontaneous and impetuous as her comfort level in the group increased. The night they discussed feelings about their own bodies, Sarah unhooked her padded bra from beneath her T-shirt, wiggled out of it, threw it to the center of the circle, and announced, “For starts, I'm never, ever going to wear falsies again. Or a bra for that matter!” Everyone laughed, and when the applause died down, Sarah said with a grin, “And to think, less than ten years ago I carried an extra pair of white cotton gloves in my purse in case the ones on my hands got soiled.”

By mid-February the moving van arrived. Sarah's possessions seemed minuscule in the huge truck, compared to the stuffed U-Haul she'd left behind. There wasn't much to show for twenty-five years of marriage.

The Mayflower movers carried cartons, boxes, and loosely padded articles up the long flight of stairs to Sarah's apartment, and they guffawed over most of the items. Like the tarnished oval mirror, framed in faded purple velvet, with elk horns circling it. She giggled when one of the movers asked, “What kind of a strange thing is this?”

“It's a *recuerdo* from a friend.” The movers looked at her as if she were a true eccentric and Sarah basked in her new-found Bohemian behavior.

“Lady, you have all kinds of weird things, but no real furniture,” the movers said.

“That's true,” Sarah responded without explanation—for once. The movers wouldn't understand. She wasn't certain that she did.

It took Sarah until early March to empty the cartons filled with sheets, towels, clothes, kitchen utensils, and art supplies, and to find a place for everything in her tiny apartment. Her promised studio was still uninhabitable. Each month when she mailed her rent check she wrote: “When will my studio be ready?” But she received no response from the landlord. When Bill periodically showed up to work on the studio, he always seemed to disappear before Sarah could pin him down.

Sarah had left her books packed in their cartons until she had time to go to the local lumber yard. The salesman liked her and offered to cut the plywood boards to size, without charge, so she could build a bookcase. He also provided scrap lumber so Sarah was only charged for the nails.

The bookcase Sarah built was a work of art. A large box as a base for her television, long boards across the top of the TV attached to smaller boxes on both sides. All the shelves were slanted. After Sarah nailed in the first shelf and discovered it was crooked, she rationalized that books were different heights and would fit perfectly on the sloped shelves.

Once the completed bookcase was filled with colorful hardbacks, paperbacks, art books, and artifacts, it had a jaunty look, and Sarah's guests complied when asked to sign the unpainted bookcase. With a red marker Gloria drew a hand with the middle finger pointed toward the ceiling and next to it she printed, "Fuck you, world!" Anyone who entered the apartment signed in and the autographed bookcase always provided a good laugh.

The bookcase had been in place for a week before Sarah realized she had not unpacked any *Great Books*. Thinking that she might have mislabeled a packing box, she opened the remaining cartons and found a note from Bob. "Sarah," it read. "You asked for one bottle of gin and you took two. Typical. So now you don't get any. Fuck you! Nasty letter to follow."

The trill of Sarah's laughter filled the room. Bob was so damn petty; she was glad she'd left him. She recalled that she had taken two bottles of gin from a full case beneath the bar in the rec room. Sarah had sold the gin, at half-price, to the woman in the front house. She and her friends preferred wine.

There were no *Great Books* in any of the cartons, and Sarah fumed remembering Bob watching her pack each one. He did ship the dustpan, broom, and pail that had been packed in the U-Haul. It would have cost him far less to send a check and have them replaced.

By evening Sarah's vacillating moods had shifted back and forth between, "This will end soon. Bob will come for me," as she smacked a brown thing scooting across the wall, to "Bob's a cheap, petty bastard!" as she emptied her overflowing ashtrays. Her mood alternated from anger, as she lugged garbage bags down the steps, to despair, as she prepared for bed. What if Bob didn't save her? Was he keeping her at poverty level so she'd beg to come back?

As Sarah's separation from Bob lengthened, her illusion that "tomorrow will be better" began to crack. Her denial had eroded to the point where harsh reality began to seep into consciousness. If Bob's weekly check arrived late, and it usually did, she was certain she'd never receive another and would end up on a park bench with a newspaper over her face.

She'd cuss and swear, and work herself into a tizzy until the check arrived, from two to four days late. When she finally received it, her attitude would change and she'd look at his handwriting on the envelope and miss him. What she really missed was daily companionship, someone who cared whether she lived or died. Bob knew her history, no one in California did. Her only continuity was watching "As the World Turns"; it was her life that had become a soap opera.

Waking alone in Josh's old bed, she missed the Bob of her youth who had kissed her awake. She remembered mornings when she'd awakened beside him, and forgot the Bob who had turned his back to her in bed. She remembered the sweet odor of his skin after a day out in the sun, and forgot his familiar frown when he arrived home from the office, his voice on the cutting edge of rage.

She'd drag out of bed, and the silence as she dressed seemed more like defeat than solitude. That night she read: "Only movie stars and exceptional women have lovers after forty. The rest of the female population turn their faces to the wall." Sarah turned her face to the wall, finally falling into an exhausted sleep. She didn't feel exceptional. She feared that no one would ever love her again, not emotionally or physically.

Fate or Sarah's sweet smile, openness and enthusiasm—when anyone was present—brought interesting people into her life, but she missed her Vanderville friends. She'd been cut off from them by following Bob's advice. He'd told her to keep quiet about their separation. No longer willing to abide by Bob's rules, Sarah wrote to several friends. “Yes, it's true, I am back in college, but the real reason I'm living in California is because Bob and I are separated. Please write. I need to hear from you.”

Within ten days her mailbox swelled with letters from home. A friend and neighbor wrote:

I miss you so much. I look at your house from my kitchen window and think I'll just run over and say “Hi” and then I realize you're gone. It just breaks my heart. You're the best neighbor I ever had. You never mentioned a word about the problems you had with Bob, but I could tell. For years I watched his mother and sisters wait on him hand and foot. They catered to his every mood and he expected you to do the same. Bob's a true misogynist and spoiled to boot!

A letter from her former maid read: “Finally got your address from Mr. Shallot. I'm glad to hear you're finally separated. He always drank too much.”

Bob had told Jessie they were separated? He wasn't keeping quiet, either. Sarah considered Jessie her friend, not her maid, but she was shocked to realize that all the years Jess had changed sheets and scrubbed floors, she'd been aware of the tension.

Bob sent her a packet of accumulated mail, including months old Christmas cards. Sarah laughed to herself, men keep the stocks and bonds, but whoever lives in the house receives the Christmas cards. One of the letters in the bundle was from Mona, Sarah's friend since high school.

My mother bumped into Bob in the grocery store and he told her about your separation. I know from experience that separation brings a lot of introspection. But, don't dwell on it. Too much looking inward can make you feel crazy. I know you, Sarah, you gave Bob everything and he gave you the shaft. He always was a phony.

Sarah was dumbfounded by her friend's revelations. She had assumed that Bob was admired by all her friends and neighbors.

Mona's letter ended: "I'm remarried to a much younger man, after ten years of 'single bliss.' Don't be in too much of a hurry to remarry. You'll learn to enjoy your time alone."

Remarry! Sarah hadn't even considered divorce. But she did feel crazy. Her friends viewed Bob's behavior more realistically than she ever had. When Sarah's uncle wrote: "I know you'll land on your feet," Sarah felt sure she'd crossed the line and would end up in a mental institution like her mother.

Elizabeth wrote regularly, but Sarah found her mother's letters disturbing and unsupportive. The last letter had read:

You didn't ask for any advice, but as your mother, I have the right to give it to you. Get out of that dump you live in. You can't afford to be an artist anymore than I can. Find yourself a decent apartment, get your degree, and get a secretarial job, like I had before I married.

Sarah *hoped* she could afford to continue her college education. In January, she'd registered for classes at Immaculate Heart, and since then, she'd driven one hundred and fifty miles, round trip, twice a week to the Hollywood campus. The bumper-to-bumper freeway traffic horrified her, and once when she read a sign, "Careful, Soft Shoulder Ahead," she wished she had a soft shoulder to lean on. She was sick of homework, but she truly enjoyed being a student again. She delighted in her classes: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art.

By April, in addition to attending classes and her weekly "misfit" meetings, Sarah had arranged for a one-person show at Harbor College. The downstairs studio was still incomplete and very cold, but she bundled up with double sweaters and spent three mornings a week in the studio preparing for the "opening" in June. She had to carry her paint brushes up the stairs to wash them in the kitchen sink—the landlord still hadn't installed a sink in the studio.

The letters Sarah received had remained unanswered, for until recently, she'd had nothing good to report. Now she wrote:

Please bear with this photocopied letter. I had this “gem” copied or I'd never catch up with all my unanswered mail.

Since I left Vanderville (you'll notice I didn't write “home”) I've been doing my daily exercise. “Adjusting” it's called. This exercise takes time and energy. I've had to stretch to meet people, but I'm happy to report I have. This stretching included joining groups. Now that I have a few friends, I've stopped my “ugh” joining. I haven't belonged to so many “groups” since high school. The only thing that has kept me sane for the last few months has been work. I attend college twice a week, and once a week I work with my artist mentor, Auguste “Gus” Damai, in his L.A. studio. He is a genius. Do you think people live up to their names? He was named after Auguste Rodin, but he's a painter, not a sculptor. We've been pen-pals for years and I spent Christmas Day with Gus and his wife, Hilda.

When Hilda learned that Gus had asked me to work with him, she called and said, “You will NEVER, EVER be my husband's apprentice.” I had nothing to lose and I replied truthfully, “I am an artist. I am not looking for a man. You have nothing to fear. My husband cheated on me and that caused me a great deal of pain. I would never do that to another woman.”

Hilda agreed to a trial apprenticeship and after weeks of coming into Gus's studio every ten minutes to check up on us, she's finally accepted me. Later she announced, “Who would ever have thought that little snip of a woman with her bleached hair was really an artist?”

The owner of a local pet shop used to be a stylist at Bonwits, and we made a trade. Once every six weeks, I give him a painting lesson and he gives me a bleach. I teach one class in design at Marymount and that helps with my tuition. What a laugh, I can teach in a four-year college “based on experience,” but to teach in a California junior college, I need a Master's and I'm still working on my Bachelor's.

I manage to visit the art galleries and the L.A. Art Museum, which is really pathetic, compared to Chicago's Art Institute. I squeeze in the things I want to do and ignore the essentials, like my laundry. I let it pile up—I hate the laundromat.

Living alone means eating the heart of the celery without feeling guilty. It means trying to figure out which option to opt for after so many years of societal programming. And it means being “off beat” and the beat between. Sometimes I find myself beating the pillow at night and yelling, “fuck you world!” But, all things considered, I'm happier than I've been in a long, long time.

I miss you all. Please write to me.

Sarah added a personal note at the bottom of each copied letter and stamped almost a dozen before she mailed them.

Sarah wrote personal letters to her sons. John, busy with his job, night school, a wife, and a baby on the way, never found time to answer. It pained Sarah that she couldn't afford to call him. Josh lived in San Diego, and he called his mother from time to time, but he always seemed annoyed with her.

When Sarah hadn't heard from either of her sons for several weeks, she complained. To John she wrote, "Write to me, damn it!" And to Josh she wrote, "I have an insight. You're so afraid I'll ask you to do something for me because you only live a couple of hundred miles away, that you give me the crabby act so I won't ask."

Josh responded with a phone call and acknowledged that he felt responsible for his mother now that she was on her own. "Responsibility scares me," he said. Sarah reassured her son that although she'd told him what was happening in her life, she didn't expect him to "fix" it. Terror struck as Sarah hung up and realized she was truly on her own. She was afraid of being responsible for herself, let alone anyone else, and Josh must feel the same way. She determined that from now on she would tell her troubles to Glo and not burden her sons with the details of her life.

John called to announce the birth of his son. Carl weighed in at 7 pounds, 14 ounces and Sarah congratulated the new father. Overriding her joy was the fear that she was now too old to have another lover. Who would want to go to bed with a grandmother?

CHAPTER 19

It was only May, but the blistering heat of the morning sun in San Pedro equaled the scorch of a Vanderville August at noon. Sarah entered Newberry's on Gaffey Street, hoping to cool off. Newberry's not only resembled it's Hammond counterpart in the thirties, it even smelled the same. It reeked with the same mixture of stale air, unwashed feet, and cheap Evening-In-Paris perfume.

As Sarah passed the automatic photo-booth at the front entrance she felt as if she had walked into a scene from her past. She remembered posing the two-year-old twins in a similar booth. The salesgirl had enlarged their picture and displayed it in the window.

Sarah lingered at the doughnut counter, eyeing rows of frosted doughnuts—pink strawberry, white vanilla, and brown chocolate. Her mouth watered as she resolutely pointed to a chocolate frosted doughnut and ordered. She wondered how many dime-store doughnuts she'd consumed in her life-time.

Nibbling the doughnut with pleasure, Sarah strolled past the ribbon counter and eyed row after row of rainbow-colored grosgrain, satin, and velvet. The bands of fine fabric were uncovered, not pre-cut and pre-wrapped in plastic. She swallowed the last bite of doughnut, licked her fingertips, and reached inside her purse to wipe her hands on her wrinkled hankie.

Sarah walked past the perfume counter, avoided the jewelry department, and picked up the kitchen utensil she'd come in for; then she searched once more for her favorite department, stationery. She stood at the counter and debated her options, just as she had agonized over each purchase as a ten-year-old. As a child she'd never left the Hammond Newberry's without spending her 25-cent weekly allowance on drawing paper or a writing tablet.

She examined the boxes of paper clips and rubber bands and then fingered the soft imitation-leather cover of a spiral notebook. The notebook reminded her of one she'd owned in her teens, except for the price. The tag on this notebook read, \$1.95, rather than

25 cents. The displays in this Newberry's might look the same, but a dime-store no longer sold anything for 10 cents. Sarah counted the money in her change purse and moaned, thinking how much less a dollar purchased in 1974 than a quarter purchased in 1938. She picked up the notebook and a ball-point pen and carried her purchases to the cashier at the front entrance. She remembered when a salesgirl had stood behind each counter, available to help the shoppers, now Newberry's employed only two counter women; one at the front entrance and one at the back.

Now the cashiers could change a five-dollar bill without leaving the register. In the forties, when teen-aged Sarah handed the sales girl a fiver, her weekly allowance, the exasperated clerk would ask, "Don't you have anything smaller?" Pouting, the sales girl, not much older than Sarah, would lock the register with a key attached to her wrist with quarter-inch satin ribbon. The register couldn't be left unattended while she changed the bill.

"Five dollars doesn't buy much anymore," Sarah muttered under her breath as she waited impatiently at the checkout counter, grumbling as she counted six people lined up in front of her. She stood on one foot, then the other, her nose wrinkling in disgust at the fetid odor of perspiration that arose from the woman who stood in line directly in front of her. She wanted to step back from the offensive aroma, but three people were already lined up behind her. She reswallowed a bit of undigested doughnut that regurgitated into her mouth and felt nauseous as she examined the stenchy woman in front of her. At least she could wash. Sarah checked out the woman's cheap flowered cotton dress, bulging out over her ample hips, and her soiled slip that dragged below the uneven hem. The woman's four-year-old son, complete with runny nose, clung to his mother's unlaundered dress with filthy hands and whined, "I gotta go tada bathroom." He danced out of his broken-strapped sandals, jumping up and down, one hand pressed between his legs, the other hand pulling his mother's dress while he pleaded, "I gotta go! I gotta go!"

Frustrated and short-tempered, the mother smacked her son's bottom and aimed a weak, "you understand smile" at Sarah. The woman's eyes looked like a wounded

animal, and Sarah felt compassion for her. Perhaps the woman had no bathroom in her house and that's why her face was streaked with dirt.

Prices had changed since the Depression, but not poverty. Some things never change. Mother's still beat their defenseless children and ignored their needs. At least the filthy woman had used only her hand.

Sarah's impeccably clean mother had beaten her daughter with anything she could lay her hands on: coat hangers and hairbrushes. Elizabeth had kept a wooden spoon on the table next to her plate and would smack four-year-old Sarah on the bare leg if she didn't sit up straight or chew her food the required number of times.

Sarah looked down at the wooden spoon in her hand and discreetly laid the utensil on the gum display. She didn't need another reminder of her mistreatment. Once Elizabeth had been so enraged, she'd beaten her daughter's bare bottom until the wooden hairbrush cracked in half. Sarah was half-tempted to abandon the notebook and pen near the spoon. She wanted to escape from the heat, her memories, and the store. She remained in line; surely it couldn't be much longer.

Looking toward the store's plate glass front window in the direction of a muffled howling that had caught her attention, Sarah stared at a hound-dog tethered to a bicycle stand. The trapped animal pulled away from the rope restraint, choked, and then yowled piteously.

Sarah's dog, Snoogie, had whimpered and yowled like that. The glint in Elizabeth's eyes as she beat the animal mercilessly with a rolled-up newspaper frightened four-year-old Sarah, as she hunched in a corner watching. Sarah was really terrified when her mother waved the rolled-up newspaper in her direction and shouted, "And if you're not good, you'll get this, too!" Sarah was beaten not so much for what she did, but for what she might do.

Elizabeth would touch Sarah's fingertip to the hot stove, or shove her finger into boiling water to show her daughter what "hot" meant. "So you won't burn yourself,"

she'd say. Ha! Elizabeth hurt her daughter far more than any hot stove ever could. And on purpose.

Sarah twisted her neck from side to side to relieve her tension. What was the matter with her? The sight of a woman smacking her kid, a dog yowling, and long-repressed memories bounced around, vying for Sarah's attention. Now she remembered the many times she'd watched exasperated mothers in grocery stores smack their children. With new insight, she understood why she'd always identified with the child, not the parent, even when she'd been a parent herself.

Sarah had never laid a hand on the twins. She'd paid attention to their needs. How many restaurant meals had turned cold, the salads soggy, while she traipsed back and forth to the bathroom with one or both of her sons. It had become a game to see how many times Mommy could be fooled.

Sarah had reversed all El's mothering behaviors. Elizabeth had shouted and smacked Sarah's bottom over a broken cup. Sarah, under the same circumstances, kissed the twins and reassured them, "It's only a cup. It can be replaced. It was an accident."

Years later Josh complained to his mother, "When you wouldn't yell at me when I broke something, I felt guilty. Why didn't you yell?"

Sarah had assumed that by reversing El's form of mothering, she would be the perfect mother. Now she knew better. She'd made her own mistakes, but she had nourished the twins, physically and emotionally. She believed them when they said they hurt and she agonized over her own shortcomings as a parent. If she felt she owed the twins an apology for her behavior, she said, "I was wrong. I apologize."

After what seemed an interminable waste of time, Sarah exited Newberry's, grateful to breathe fresh air once more. Sunlight sparkled like miniature diamonds on the cement pavement as she searched in her shoulder bag for her car keys. Perspiration dripped between her breasts, no falsies or bra to absorb the moisture, or to imprison her femininity.

She “ouched” her way across the hot, black leather seat of the Pontiac, touched and then retouched the steering wheel until her hands could tolerate the heat, wiped her hankie under her bangs, and bemoaned the temperature. It wasn't even noon and already Sarah was soaked with perspiration. She wondered if she could accomplish anything in this heat, let alone work in her airless studio. Soon her thoughts slid to the beauty of the ocean and her favorite spot on the shore, next to Marine Land. Ocean . . . waves . . . sun . . . to hell with working today. Sarah, who always mapped her days and rarely allowed a detour, had made a decision. She was going to the beach.

Twenty minutes later, wearing her bikini under her jeans and cotton blouse, Sarah grabbed a Turkish towel, an apple, plastic-wrapped cheese and crackers, and stuffed them into her large straw carryall. Then she headed to her car for the drive to Venice Beach.

She motored along Pacific Coast Highway with the car windows rolled down, admiring the sail boats dotting the horizon, the steering wheel cooled from the ocean breeze, the mild wind blowing her hair and fluttering against her pale cheek. She sighed with contentment at the highway signs—Redondo Beach, Hermosa Beach—and wondered why she didn't recognize a landmark. After all, she and her mother had lived in this area when she was six, seven, and eight. For three years they'd lived alone in California. Sarah had many happy childhood memories of that time. Now she couldn't stand the sound of her mother's voice on the phone. She cringed when she heard El say “Hello.”

Well, nothing stays the same, Sarah thought, as she concentrated on highway traffic. The road circled through Marina Del Rey and away from the ocean, and with less traffic on the side streets, Sarah viewed the towering buildings and funky shops filled with overpriced clothing. Another developer's dream, she mused, and an artist's nightmare. Is it progress to replace orange groves with shopping centers? Marina Del Rey was another manmade amusement with single's bars swinging open on every corner, busy with secretary's and stewardesses vying for the pseudo-macho males, imitations of Olympic gold medalist Mark Spitz.

Those men were repulsive, with their ersatz personalities, their mustaches, their gold medallions hanging on gold chains around their necks, their shirts open to their navels exposing their bronzed hairless chests. They were disgusting. Sarah would rather be alone than date men like that. Then reality slapped her in the face, and she sighed in resignation. She was too old. Those young guys wouldn't give her a glance. She visualized those unavailable golden-boys wearing trousers so tight she could see the bulge around their inseams.

Bob had teased Sarah about only liking ballet because the men wore protective cups under their jock-straps. He'd aggravate her by adding, "I'll bet your brain is filled with hundreds of oversized pricks." She'd blush and reply, "That's ridiculous," and then be unable to think about anything else. Bob hated ballet so he had to find a way to put her down.

Was Bob really the great lover he claimed to be? Was his penis the perfect size and shape as he so often boasted? Sarah had no way to compare; she had never had a lover other than Bob. She longed to be hugged and kissed and wondered if any man would ever find her attractive enough to want to make love to her. It had been over six months since she'd slept with Bob, and sex had become an obsession. She saw phallic symbols everywhere—in deodorant and perfume bottles, in lipstick tubes, and in hair curlers.

Near the Venice Boardwalk, Sarah eased the Pontiac into a parking space, pleased with her luck at finding such a convenient spot. Of course, the nine-to-fivers were still at work. How could they cope being cooped up for the whole day? Sarah hadn't worked a nine-to-five job since she was twenty-two, and her only office skill was typing. She fretted that if she were forced to "go straight," who would hire her? She knew she'd rather be dead than be cooped up in an office typing eight hours a day.

She was an artist! She would never take a nine-to-five office job. The fact that some days Sarah spent more than eight hours in her studio, with less recompense than she'd earned in 1953 at her day job, never occurred to her.

“I’ll find a way. I will,” Sarah reassured herself. Cheerful once more, she marched across the wood-slatted boardwalk with a spring to her step. She inspected the tarnished gilt buildings, untouched by the wrecker’s ball, the peeling paint and baroque façades on the few remaining buildings. She eyed the second-hand clothing displayed in the store windows. What’s with the seventies rage for the styles of the thirties and forties? She wondered. She should have listened to El’s advice: “Save your clothes, everything comes back in style. Eventually.” Even Mom was right, once in a while. Filled with nostalgia, Sarah wandered the boardwalk and remembered other boardwalks from her childhood. She remembered the roller coaster in Long Beach, the one that swung in an arc over the ocean, and her screams and laughter as she held tight to the protective bar across her lap. She remembered the freshly painted buildings that had housed all the magic in the world to a six-year-old.

Shop windows filled with boxes inscribed with secret words she couldn’t fathom; cedar boxes filled with pencils; boxes lined with red satin snuggling china-faced dolls; purple satin pin-cushions at the feet of a gray leather elephant with fake diamonds and emeralds sparkling in bands of jewels around its head. Strings of fake pearls wrapped around the elephant’s trunk spelled frozen mystery to Sarah, and she hungered for everything in the window, while her mother tried to convince her nothing on display was worth buying. She moved reluctantly from the window as her mother tugged at her hand and said, “We have other things to do, let’s move on. Come on, Sarah, I’ll buy you a hamburger for lunch.”

Hand in hand, mother and daughter strolled the boardwalk until they reached the red and blue sign that read, “GIANT HAMBURGERS, 10¢” Sarah wiggled in front of the hamburger stand, embarrassed by her uncovered chest and the boys bathing trunks she wore. Elizabeth had only become prudish about her daughter’s behavior when Sarah had entered her teens. Elizabeth, in her twenties, considered herself a “free thinker,” dabbled in mysticism, and insisted Sarah go bare-chested on the beach. This was the

same woman who punished her five-year-old daughter by putting her to bed naked and shamed her into staying there. Elizabeth's inconsistency was endless.

Sarah pulled her doughnut-shaped yellow cotton sun hat over her head and wiggled the doughnut hole over her face and neck, then crossed her arms over the pleated yellow cloth to cover her bare chest. She begged her mother again to buy her a bathing suit with a top like the other girl's wore, but El's answer remained the same. "Stop your begging, Sarah. I am not buying you a girl's bathing suit; the sun is good for you." Then her mother would chuckle and add, "Besides, you have nothing to hide."

Sarah turned her attention to the man behind the counter as he scraped the grill with a long-handled spatula. He'd slap down raw hamburger patties in a neat row and place fresh cut buns on the back of the burner. Sarah's mouth watered in anticipation as she listened to the burgers sizzle and watched as the french fries were dumped in a wire basket and plunged into hot fat that sizzled. Her eyes lit up as the man handed her a hamburger, piled high with tomatoes, lettuce, pickles and mustard. He handed Sarah her drink. Sipping it she said, "Mommy, I like milkshakes, not malts. Why can't I ever have a milkshake?"

"Malts are more nourishing."

Sarah took another sip of her malt and thought how much she hated them, then turned and looked up at her mother saying, "Please, Mommy, please can I have a girl's bathing suit?"

"Sarah Mindel, say may, and NO, you may not. Don't ask me again."

Sarah tugged at her beach hat and wished she had a girl's bathing suit, not trunks like her friends Sherman and Tommy. They thought she was a boy. They even asked Sarah why she had a girl's name.

Damn her, Sarah thought, as she sat on the cement bordering the sand and removed her tennis shoes, then stood to remove her jeans. Little girls need girl's bathing

suits for gender identification. Sarah knew that if she'd *wanted* a malt, El would have insisted she drink a milkshake.

She stepped gingerly onto the burning sand. Sarah, as agile and slender as a teenager, unaware of her beauty at fourteen or past forty, felt men ogle her bare legs. She wished her breasts were larger, and her hips smaller. Bart said a woman with good legs and large boobs was built like a brick shit-house. He had such a way with words, Sarah giggled, as she ouches her way across the hot sand.

A tall, tanned, life-guard-type breezed past Sarah and whispered, "You're pale, Baby, but you sure are adorable."

Sarah, adorable? Only in California would a stranger whisper sweet nothings as he rocketed past. Unconsciously Sarah sucked in her flat stomach. Her nipples hard under her bikini-top, her over-blouse concealing her ripe figure.

Adorable, she thought. Me, a grandmother? Her lips curled at the corners in a Mona Lisa smile, more flattered by the stranger's words than annoyed by his enthusiasm. Baby! That man called her baby. Well, she was nobody's baby now. She spread her towel on dry sand, ten yards from the breaking surf.

Sarah placed one shoe on each corner of the towel, as her mother had once placed her shoes on the beach blanket. She removed her blouse, folded it along with her jeans, then dropped to her knees and stretched herself across the warm terry-cloth and tickled her toes in the sand. The hot sun licked her fair skin and she felt peaceful. The cloudless blue sky and the sound of waves lapping on shore replaced the cacophony of freeway traffic as Sarah reveled in the sounds and textures of the Pacific.

The roar of a plane overhead disturbed her momentarily. She sat up, searched in her straw carry-all for her see-through make-up-kit, and removed her compact. She brought the mirror up close to her face and looked at her black roots and blonde bangs. I'm in transition, she thought, and my hair is half-way, too.

Sarah powdered her patrician nose that belied her Jewish heritage and laughed at herself. Why was she powdering her nose on the beach while others smeared suntan

lotion all over their bodies? She dragged her orange lipstick across her full lips; her mouth, with its seam down the center of her bottom lip, was a carbon-copy of Bart's. The dimples in her cheeks, below her high cheekbones, distinctly her own. Sarah pressed her lips together, blotted her mouth with tissue, licked her lower lip and pondered makeup in general.

Sarah was a chameleon who camouflaged herself. At fifteen she applied nothing but lipstick. With each passing year, she'd added a new cosmetic. Bob had teased, "You look as good as you used to, it just takes you longer." Without makeup Sarah felt naked and unattractive. In Vanderville, Bob would walk in the front door and say, "At least you could put on lipstick before I come home." He didn't want her to look natural or be real. She wanted to be real—to really know who she was and what she felt. Under the makeup, under the façade, there must be a real person. Would the real Sarah Shallot please stand up?

Sarah tucked her makeup kit back in her roomy straw carry all and dug deeper until her fingers touched her new spiral notebook. Retrieving it, together with her new ball-point pen, she opened the notebook to the first blank page and wrote: Sarah Shallot. Under her name she wrote: 18530 Mohawk Drive, San Pedro, California. On top of the second blank page she wrote: May 24th, 1974, and the thought crossed her mind that in five more days she would be separated from Bob for seven months.

She kept track of the days, weeks, and months alone the way she'd once kept track of the twins' age. Her babies had personalities of their own when they were only five months old. Fraternal twins, each an individual. Babies. Baby. That man called her baby. Her dad called her baby until he died. Sarah forgot the sun and surf to concentrate on writing a long-forgotten memory in her notebook.

"Hey Baby," Bart summoned, as he bent and poked his bald head around the half-open door to the den. "I've got to check the DOG HOUSE, wanta come with Daddy?"

At the sound of her father's voice, Sarah had automatically closed her latest Nancy Drew book. Now she stared at the bald top of her father's head, placed her closed book on the end table, leaped to her feet, and rushed to throw her arms around the mound of Bart's hairy, bare belly. Bart wrapped her in a tighter hug.

“Quick, Baby, change your dress while I shave. Wear your blue one, the one I like, and tell your mother to tie a blue ribbon in your hair. I like you to look nice when you're with me.”

Sarah nodded her head up and down, saying, “Yes, yes, Daddy, I'll hurry.” Just Daddy and me, she thought, as she rushed to her bedroom, her eyes shining with expectation as she yanked the crisply ironed blue dress from its hanger. This dress was her favorite, too.

She skipped into the kitchen with her blue hair ribbon in her hand and said, “Hurry, Mommy, tie my bow. If I'm late Daddy won't wait for me.”

In the car, Bart turned to his daughter and said, “You look beautiful, Baby,” and then pulled her close and bit one of her firm round cheeks. Sarah pulled back, whining, “Daddy, that hurts.”

“No, it doesn't. I love your rosy cheeks, Baby. They're like delicious apples and I wanta bite,” Bart chuckled. Teeth marks marred Sarah's cheek, but her smile returned when he said, “You know I wouldn't hurt you, Baby. Don't pout.”

“Hold on, Baby, here we go,” Bart joked as he shoved the car gear in reverse and the caddy plunged backward into the street, and then zoomed forward. Sarah bounced backward then forward on the front seat, and Bart asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Daddy. May I push the button that makes the windows go down?”

“Sure, baby. It's damn hot today. Push the button for my window, too.”

The caddy trembled at the traffic light as someone yelled from the sidewalk, “Hi, Bart!” The fins and Bart waved back as he wondered aloud, “Who the hell was that?”

“You know everyone, Daddy.” Sarah replied, proud to be in the front seat with her father, and not in the back seat where her mother insisted she sit.

Bart turned to Sarah and asked, “Baby, do you love me?”

“Oh yes, Daddy.” Sarah's voice was solemn as she said, “I promise to love you for ever and ever,” and she crossed her finger over her heart, “Hope to die. I'll never love anyone but you, Daddy.”

“That's good, Baby. I love you, too.” Bart kept one eye on the road and reached across the seat to tweak Sarah's nose and whisper, “Baby-Nu” then pinched her cheek between his thumb and forefinger. Sarah flinched but didn't complain.

“Baby, how old are you now?” Bart asked.

“Nine, going on ten.” Sarah looked six. Elizabeth wrapped her hair tight in rag-curls and shortened her dresses to thigh high. The discrepancy between Sarah's behavior and her physical appearance were rarely noticeable.

“Sarah, do you know any swear words?” Bart asked.

“What's a swear word, Daddy?”

“Oh, words like damn.”

“Oh, yes, Daddy. God damn it, hell, shit, son-of-a bitch.” Sarah continued spewing out the words on command: “G.D., bitch . . .” The Cadillac reached another traffic light. “Bastard.”

The red-haired cop at the intersection looked at the child with the angelic face, her blonde curls tied back with a blue bow, her dimples deep with her smile, as he listened to her litany of curses. His freckles almost disappeared into his eyes as his cheeks puffed with laughter. He snickered and choked as he waved Bart on through the red light.

Bart laughed until his eyes teared. He wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand and said, in a mock-serious tone, “Sarah, Baby, ladies don't use swear words. You're a lady like your mother. Don't ever use those words again.” Then Bart raised one cheek from the leather seat and exploded with a loud, smelly fart. Sarah was grateful the car windows were wide open.

Bart made the rounds of his places every afternoon. He checked the register tapes and the liquor bottles. He kept tabs on the day man and the afternoon B-girls by turning

the bottles upside down, when the help wasn't looking, and marking the corner of the paper label with a pencil. The mark didn't show with the bottle upright, but when it was turned over, Bart knew how much liquor had been consumed and whether it matched the amount of cash in the register. If not, he knew the help had been drinking up his profit. Again. Bart knew there were sixteen ways to steal from him, and God help the employee who tried to steal from Bart.

Father and daughter entered the DOG HOUSE hand in hand, and Sarah asked, "Will Geraldine be here, Daddy?"

"Yes, Baby. Why?"

"I like Geraldine. She's so funny. She makes me laugh. But she smells funny."

Sarah blinked, squeezed her eyes tight, and then opened them wide. The bright sunshine outdoors hadn't prepared her for the dimly lit bar. The interior of the tavern looked dull brown, even with the window shades rolled up. The stuffed poodles dangling over the bar looked limp and stained in the faded light.

Sarah was too young to know that the tinsel and glitter of the night before was tarnished in half-light, like sequins on a whore's dress. There was no glamour in the odor of stale beer, dried perspiration, and cheap perfume that assaulted Sarah's nostrils.

Her head reeled as she stared at the curved oak bar, monumental in the long, narrow room. The bar seemed small to Sarah, compared to the obese woman who leaned against the bar's cool surface. In one hand a shot glass gleamed between Geraldine's swollen fingers, while the other hand mopped her wet forehead with the end of her soiled apron. Perspiration oozed from Geraldine like melted lard.

"It's a bitch today . . . this heat!" Geraldine greeted. "Oops, sorry Bart, I didn't see Sarah."

Geraldine downed her drink in one fast gulp and laid the empty shot glass on the bar behind her. She moved forward with a giant step and pressed Sarah into her warm wine-stained bosom. Geraldine hugged and hugged and hugged Sarah, lifting the child off her feet and pressing her nose into the fat folds of her own whiskeyed neck. Sarah

felt sick to her stomach. She had already incorporated her mother's feelings about, "THOSE BAR PEOPLE!" Still, she reveled in the hugs and attention. She knew better than to complain, or to be less than polite.

Geraldine lowered Sarah to the floor and held her at arm's length, saying, "Honey, you get prettier every day. I like your blue ribbon. It matches your dress."

Bart's world. Bart's employees knew it didn't hurt to be nice to the boss's daughter, while Elizabeth's refined world reminded Sarah, "If you touch anything while you're in the bar with Daddy, be sure to wash your hands, or if anyone touches you. Be polite. Be sure and say thank you."

"You want some ginger ale, Sarah?" Geraldine asked, as she reached behind the bar for a bottle and glass.

"Thank you, Miss Geraldine," Sarah said, as she eyed the glass suspiciously, sure the rim would poison her, as her mother's warnings implied. Still, more thirsty than cautious, she sipped her chilled ginger ale and promised herself she'd wash her hands as soon as she finished. She'd tell Daddy that she had to go to the bathroom. Sarah, delighted to be with her father and his bar-people, felt as superior to them as her mother did. She felt flattered yet dirtied by their attention, although she craved it.

Someone put a slug in the jukebox, and the "Atchison, Topeka, and the Sante Fe" streamed out, all engines churning full blast. Geraldine raised her droopy skirt high, almost to her crotch, and began to dance. Her legs looked like inverted bowling pins as she kicked one foot in the air like a chorus-girl. Geraldine swayed to the beat; she had incredible rhythm for a woman who weighed over two hundred pounds.

Her gigantic breasts heaved with exertion; what wasn't up or down, was up and over. Sweat dripped down Geraldine's forehead and into her eyes as she danced faster, faster, faster, keeping time to the train engine's toot as it rounded the bend. She never missed a beat as she spun in a circle and collapsed against the bar. Rivulets of sweat covered her eyelids and dropped to her cheeks. She dabbed at her eyes with the tail of

her apron and grinned, her yellow, nicotine-stained teeth conspicuous with her wide smile of accomplishment.

“Shit!” Bart's voice broke the moment. “Who's been at my Cutty Sark? Have you been drinking from this bottle, Geraldine? And why hasn't the janitor cleaned up this mess? Why hasn't the spittoon been emptied?”

One by one, the B-girls emerged from their rooms upstairs. One held the curved banister as she traipsed down the steps, and then wiggled, without support, past the upright piano, the brass worn down on the foot pedal.

All the B-girls walked gingerly around last night's cigarette butts and Bart's special printed ear covers that advertised the DOG HOUSE. He called them “Bull-shit protectors.” They tramped past the wrinkled napkins, bobby-pins and one half-laced man's shoe. Their ankle-strapped high heels tat-tat-tatted against the wooden floor, while their slacks revealed bare-ankles with every step. One girl wore a natty old sweater three sizes too big, pulled low over her ass; another wore a sweater three sizes too small, the shrunken wool barely covering her brassiere. Her skin, pale and white between the bottom of her tight sweater and the open buttons at the top of her slacks. No sequins, crepe dresses, or rhinestone earrings for the B-girls in the afternoon. One girl's hair strung across her ears, while another's hair looked matted with a curl half in-half out. One girlish woman wore a patterned scarf around her head, and threads from the unraveled hem hung limp against her cheek. Black mascara smudged their cheeks and lipstick smeared their chins. One girl, with long painted red nails that were chipped at the tips, waved her finger at Sarah and said, “Hey girls, look who's here.”

“Hi Honey,” the B-girls shouted in unison, like a Greek chorus.

Those B-girls who survived past their twenties became the Geraldine's in their forties, their stomachs swollen with unvomited bottled-in-bond. B-girls faded quickly from booze and abuse. How lovely Kathleen, Nora, Dagmar, and Darcy had looked the night before, their hair sprayed tight in fancy dos, their paste jewelry sparkling. Now in afternoon light their features looked taut, the whites of their eyes like rusty water from a

neglected tap. Their reflections were distorted in the mirror behind the bar and their stale perfume clung to their matted hair—a noxious mixture of faded youth and carnality.

All the B-girls looked alike to Sarah, except for Madeline. She wore black tailored suits and pristine, white tailored blouses. Her slender black-hosed legs looked as firm and shapely as Elizabeth's, but, unlike blonde-haired Elizabeth, Madeline wore her blue-black hair parted in the middle like Hedy Lamar. When Madeline smiled at Sarah, with her perfectly spaced white teeth, Sarah felt special. Madeline had a regal air, no trace of the former farm girl remained, despite her work as manager of the DOG HOUSE. Madeline appeared as fresh and unsullied as a novice, no vice apparent in her studied calmness. Only her secretive green eyes flashing hot and cold gave a hint of malice.

Sarah admired Madeline, so calm in contrast to her nervous mother; so self-possessed as she patted the top of Sarah's head and said, “Tell your Daddy to bring you here more often. You brighten up this dump.” Sarah, with puerile honesty, blurted, “I want to be just like you when I grow up.”

“You'd better not let your mother hear you say that, Baby,” Bart commanded, and winked at Madeline over Sarah's shoulder.

Sarah laid her ball-point on the blanket, clenched and unclenched her fingers for a second or two, then stared at the ocean for a minute before picking up the pen.

Sixteen-year-old Sarah found her mother sitting in an overstuffed chair in the living room, tears streaming down her face. Tears were a rarity for Elizabeth. Sarah pressed her mother for an explanation and a reluctant woman confessed: “I found lipstick on your father's shirt, again.” Elizabeth, vulnerable and tearful, was unaware of the shock in Sarah's eyes. Her reserve was lost as she bluntly said, “I caught your father with 'Shtunk,' that stinker, Madeline, before you were born. Your father owned an ice cream parlor during Prohibition. I found the two of them in a back room; your father's pants were around his ankles, and *shtunk's* skirt was over her head. I was eight months

pregnant—with you—and I just backed out the door. That night at dinner, I broke very dish on the table.”

Sarah knelt beside Elizabeth's chair, took her mother's hand between her own and tried to console her. “Living with Daddy must be difficult at times. With his changing moods, he can make you feel very, very blue. On the other hand, when he makes you laugh, I’ll bet you feel great.”

Elizabeth looked deep into her daughter's eyes, smiled wanly, and said, “I guess you're right.”

Sarah fetched a hankie, and Elizabeth wiped her eyes and gently blew her nose. “Thank you, Sarah. I feel better. You're just a child (Sarah was sixteen), but you understand.” Elizabeth rose to her feet, brushed an invisible crumb off her white tea apron, kissed Sarah's cheek, and said matter-of-factly, “It must be after four—time to start dinner,” as she walked briskly toward the kitchen.

Sarah remained in the living room, curled up in Elizabeth's chair, the pleasant odor of El's talcum a sweet reminder of her mother. Sarah, proud to be a grown-up's confidant, sat quietly pondering what it was she supposedly understood. Then she remembered her mother saying, “I broke every dish on the table.” Sarah remembered that, too, so Elizabeth must have broken dishes more than once.

Teenage Sarah remembered the Sarah of not more than four who lived with her parents in the Depression apartment above the butcher shop. She remembered her father's curse:

“God damn it! These potatoes have lumps!” Bart exploded, as he lifted his dinner plate and hurled it against the wall. The white potatoes smashed, without a lump, and stuck to the stained kitchen wall. Roaches attacked Bart's dinner before his china plate shattered to the floor.

Slowly, deliberately, Elizabeth picked up her empty soup bowl and whacked it smartly on the edge of the red enamel table, china fragments clattered to the floor. In

silence, she picked up her water glass and smacked it on the table edge; the glass shattered and water splattered. Elizabeth whacked her dinner plate, her cup, her saucer, her dessert dish filled with canned peaches, Bart's soup bowl, his cup and saucer, his dessert dish, his water glass and each volley thundered to the floor. Then Elizabeth swept her arm across the table and the metallic rattle of silverware clanged against the china dishes that littered the linoleum, while chipped red enamel floated in the air above the china calamity. Then Elizabeth rose silently, walked to her bedroom, and slammed the door behind her.

Sarah, traumatized, sat in her high chair staring at primer white etched against rage-red enamel, then lifted her eyes from the table to watch her father sweep a broom across the moving brown wall. In silence, Bart swept cockroaches into a dust pan and then silently swept up broken china and bent silverware. He released Sarah from her high chair and, without a word, slammed out the kitchen door carrying a paper bag filled to the top with dead roaches and broken dishes.

Sarah quietly opened her mother's bedroom door, peeked in, tiptoed to the bed, and looked at Elizabeth lying flat on her back staring at the ceiling.

She leaned against the sheet-covered mattress and stretched to reach her mother's hand, pleading, "Mommy, Mommy, pueez Mommy, pueez tauk to me." Elizabeth remained silent, her body rigid, her eyes unblinking as she stared upward at the ceiling.

An adult Sarah stretched across her beach towel, flat on her stomach, one elbow supporting her head, while the other supported her hand with the tightly clenched pen. "Mommy, Mommy," she wrote.

"Miss?"

Sarah winced at the sound of a voice so close to her ear, her mind still locked in reverse as she turned her head toward the voice and muttered, "Huh, what?" and looked into the hooded eyes of a stranger who knelt perilously close to her side. Befuddled, Sarah dropped her pen, pushed herself up to her knees, and asked, "What do you want?"

“Miss, would you like me to rub suntan lotion on your back? You looked so deep in thought, so beautiful that I ...”

Sarah, alert to danger now, dropped her notebook as she leaped to her feet shouting, “Go away, don't bother me!” The sound of her own voice, intense and filled with rage, shocked her as she backed away. The stranger leered at her as he rose to his feet and towered above her. He glared down at Sarah for a full minute, then turned on his heel and marched proudly away.

Mesmerized, Sarah gawked at the stranger who retreated at a steady pace across the sand. She stared at the man's bronzed back and squared shoulders. He had such dignity, he reminded her of Bob. She bit her lip and quelled a compulsion to follow “Bob” and beg him to return. She ached with desire. What she'd give to lay her head on Bob's chest and have him wrap his arms around her. Comfort her. Understand her.

Sarah watched the stranger until he disappeared into the crowded boardwalk. It was too late to change her mind. Why had she hurt his feelings? Maybe she'd made a mistake not talking to him. Who knows, he could have been Mr. Wrong, number two. Sarah burst into laughter as she bent over, touched her toes and thought, the only thing worse than being hassled is not to be hassled at all! She stretched her arms skyward and asked herself, what's different about me? She swore her behavior hadn't changed, yet something drew these strangers to her. Was she giving off a scent, like a bitch in heat?

Sarah recalled a conversation she'd had with Bob when their marriage was still intact . . .

“Bob, am I ugly?”

“Are you crazy, Sarah? Why would you ask a dumb question like that?”

“Well, I must be ugly. No one ever makes a pass at me.”

“Dummy, of course no one makes a pass at you. You're a happily married woman. You don't send the right messages.”

“What messages?”

“Sarah,” Bob laughed, “you are crazy if you think I'm going to tell you how to attract other men.”

Conflicting values warred in Sarah. Her father's legacy, a life filled with action and outspoken truth; her mother's, a life of denial and pain. Bart's message, “If a man tries to get fresh with you, just kick him hard between the legs.” Elizabeth's message, “Men are all after the same thing. No man will marry you, if you've let other men touch you.”

Sarah strolled along the shoreline, pensive as she stooped to retrieve a variegated scallop shell. Perhaps she wasn't as undesirable as she'd thought. Two men *had* made passes at her today. On the other hand, she still held the erroneous belief that all women received the same attention.

Unsure of her looks or desirability, Sarah remembered coming home from school, filled with excitement as she told her mother, “Johnny said I was the prettiest girl in kindergarten.”

“He wasn't telling you the truth. He just wanted to be your friend.”

No wonder Sarah was confused.

Cradling the scallop shell, Sarah walked on, mulling over what she'd written.

Madeline? Sarah hadn't given her father's mistress a thought since she'd seen her at the funeral home. Why had she written about her now? She'd detested the sight of *that* woman, dressed in black like the widow, mourning Elizabeth's husband. Yet at nine, Sarah had admired Madeline and had wanted black hair just like hers. Had she felt her father's attraction to the *shtunk* and subconsciously thought if she were more like Madeline her father would give *her* all his love and attention? Was Madeline still alive? There were so many unanswered questions.

Elizabeth knew about Bart's mistress before Sarah was born. Why had she tolerated his behavior and stayed with him? Sarah stood at the water's edge staring at the

horizon without seeing it. Elizabeth had left Bart once. No, twice. When Sarah was three years old she'd been boarded on a farm while her mother and father were separated.

The farmer had kicked little Sarah's blocks across the room in a fit of rage, and the corner of one landed on her forehead. Sarah rubbed her fingertip across the scar the block left and a fearful quiver spasmed her body. Agitated, she twisted her neck from side to side. Sarah had used the example of the kicked blocks to prove to the twins that she understood when they complained about something *bad* that had happened to them. Josh and Johnny had looked at their mother as if she were crazy. So a farmer had kicked her blocks, so what?

Reaching into her blouse pocket, Sarah removed her cigarettes and lighter, lit one, and took a deep drag; her memories kept pace with each puff of smoke. Sarah had been boarded on that farm the first time Elizabeth left Bart. But, the second time she'd left her husband, she and Sarah had lived in Long Beach. Bart had visited them only once in a year-and-a-half.

Sarah remembered that visit and the love and attention Bart had showered on her. During the day. Until now, she'd forgotten the nights she'd lie in bed with the covers pulled up over her ears to mask out the moans and the squeaking bedsprings. She felt as sick to her stomach now as she had then, huddled under the covers to escape the groans and the shame she still felt.

Bob had never understood why Sarah was upset if the springs squeaked when the twins were in earshot. How tacky of Sarah's parents to make love with their daughter only a few feet away in the small trailer. But Bart's whole world was tacky. Bars. Taverns.

Gloria kept insisting that Sarah join her at a "single's bar," but Sarah wanted no part of that scene. Sarah detested bars and taverns. The odor of beer or whiskey on anyone's breath and she felt nauseous.

Sarah took a long drag on her cigarette, bent over, and snubbed it out in the sand. Then she cupped the butt and tucked it in her blouse pocket. Sarah was no litter-bug, but

she was bugged by memories. Her thoughts jumped from bars to bartenders, and she concluded that they all looked like her father. Not their features, of course, but their pale skin, untouched by daylight, and their eyes. Definitely their eyes; that penetrating look that came from knowing too much, seeing too much.

Returning to her towel, Sarah rescued it from the rising tide and dragged it up to dry sand, along with her shoes and straw carry-all. Kneeling, she dug into the bottom of the bag and retrieved her watch, relieved to see that it was only 4:30 PM. She settled cross-legged on the towel and removed her plastic wrapped food. She nibbled on cheese, munched on soda crackers, and decided that Mona was right; “Too much introspection will drive you nuts.” Still, Sarah knew that to understand her present, she'd have to search her past. “Those who forget (their) history, are condemned to repeat it.” She skimmed her memories searching for clues.

Sarah had been the first one of her high school crowd to marry. Mona had been the first one to be divorced. Sarah wondered if she'd be the second. The word “divorce” terrified her, but lately *that* word had crept into her consciousness. If there were to be no “happily ever after,” Sarah wanted to know why. She searched her memory for beginnings.

She was born in December 1928, almost 1929, and her first memories included silent movies, black and white flickers on the kitchen wall, as she watched from her crib. Bart's brother, a movie projectionist, supplied the “free” film. Sarah remembered Snoogie, her dog, had slept under the sink, and a framed magazine picture of Clark Gable hung on the kitchen wall above it.

Sarah remembered her mother's bobbed hair and Elizabeth bragging, “I was the first one in my crowd to bob my hair.” She remembered her mother dancing the Charleston while she wiggled in her high-chair and spit food out as fast as her mother spooned it in. Sarah had an unconventional memory. Like Thomas Wolfe, she had hypermnesia and could remember significant and insignificant events in detail as far back

as her first year of life. She remembered when she'd taken her first steps, toddling into Grandma's waiting arms. She couldn't remember the date of the War of 1812, but she clearly remembered that picture book that had been kicked against her forehead.

Finishing her snack, Sarah ignored her growing thirst, and settled on her stomach, her arms and palms supporting her chin as she listened to children's light-hearted laughter turn to anguish as their mother's dragged them from their sand castles. "Come here this minute, Mary, David, Joanne. Right now. I have to get home to fix dinner. Daddy will be mad. Hurry."

Small, rushing feet kicked sand, and the mild breeze blew it in Sarah's direction. She cursed softly, brushing the offending sand in the direction it came from. She didn't have to fix dinner for anyone, not any more. She could stay on the beach until the sun set if she wanted to. Sarah pinched her arm, watched the contrast of white and pink, assuring herself that she never burned.

Lying on her stomach, one arm folded under her head, Sarah closed her eyes and her memories played like movies—each one ready to pop with a kernel of truth. She remembered herself at four, sitting on the sofa, her feet dangling over the side sobbing as she pleaded, "Peeze, Mommy, peeze." Elizabeth, dressed formally in a long white gown, stood across the room near the door as Sarah pouted and whimpered, "Peeze, Mommy, don't go."

Sarah remembered her mother's friend Clara saying, "Go ahead, El, ignore her. Just go. She'll stop crying as soon as you leave." Clara, towering over her, commanded, "Stop that crying this instant. Are you trying to spoil your mother's good time? You are a bad girl. A very bad girl."

Sarah changed arms under her head and twisted her face away from the sun, wondering why she remembered something so insignificant. Didn't all children cry when their mother's left them with sitters? Disgusted, Sarah deliberately switched her thoughts to other memories from the thirties.

She remembered a man holding his battered fedora in his hand, sitting on the front steps and thanking Elizabeth profusely when he accepted a dinner plate filled with food. She remembered her father berating her mother: “El, you're a pushover. Don't you understand that bum drew an X on the sidewalk in front of the house, so the next bum will know where to get a handout. I'm not made of money. Stop feeding every bum that comes to the door.”

Sarah had no food to give. She gave her pennies to men who slouched on the sidewalk outside Newberry's, where they sat holding a tin cup in their hands, and pencils that no one bought.

Even in the Depression, the Mindel's never went hungry. Sarah remembered her father telling her about “the hard times” as he sat at the kitchen table slicing corn off the cob onto his dinner plate.

Bart held the sharp paring knife, his mouth going nonstop as corn kernels piled high on his plate. “Let me tell you about the Depression, Sarah. We never went hungry, but that's because I worked my tail off for you and your mother. I remember shivering in five-degree weather, selling Christmas trees. My nose was running and I was shaking with cold, but I wouldn't go home until I sold the last tree. That was before I owned the ice cream parlor. I sold . . .”

“We sold, Bart!” Elizabeth interrupted. We sold ice cream and ham sandwiches and egg sandwiches, and ham and egg sandwiches. Ham and eggs, egg salad and chicken . . .”

Bart waved his hand at Elizabeth to shut her up. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, “you worked in the ice cream parlor with me for six months, and I've been working ever since.”

Bart turned his attention back to Sarah and asked, “Did I ever tell you about the chicken sandwiches?” Bart didn't wait for an answer. “Well, these five men came in and

ordered chicken sandwiches. I went into the kitchen and all I had was one cooked chicken breast. So I....”

Bart ignored the fried chicken on his dinner plate, put an imaginary chicken to his lips, laughed and said, “This is how I did it, Baby.” He chuckled as his teeth tore at an imaginary chicken breast. “Sarah, I pulled apart that chicken with my bare teeth, strand by strand....” Bart held two fingers to his mouth, gritted his teeth, and pulled imaginary chicken shreds from his lips. His body-English targeted as he pantomimed his feat and said, “I laid those shreds of chicken on five pieces of bread, threw on a bed of lettuce and mayo and served five chicken sandwiches.” Bart's body shook with his laughter, and he wiped his lips with his napkin as if he'd actually shredded a chicken. “Honest to God, Baby, I made five chicken sandwiches out of one chicken breast. I got paid for five sandwiches, too, not one. Yep, Baby, I always knew how to make a buck.”

Sarah, like Mandrake the Magician, could go back in time. She could visualize a scene from her past, hear the words spoken, and remember gestures and intonations. Recently the past had become more real to her than her present. Memories often smell like attics filled with dusty dreams.

Half-dozing on the sunny beach, Sarah's memory-movie replayed her high school years. The forties, the years she'd mimicked her father's out-going personality, and had been surrounded by friends. Bart had “thrown dances” in his youth; teenage Sarah organized dances, organized her time, collected honors and offices, and cut out one thousand silver stars to decorate the gym ceiling for the Senior Prom. While the war raged in Europe, Sarah collected money from her classmates for War Bonds, folded bandages, and cried in public when Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. Sarah's hands and mouth were always moving as she thought about, talked about, and dreamed about, boys, boys, boys.

Sarah switched arms under her head again and turned her face back toward the lowered sun. She trickled sand through the fingers of her free hand and thought about

boys. Bob was a boy when they'd met, but she'd thought he was a man. A man at nineteen, what a joke. But what did she know? She was only seventeen. They'd met the summer after Sarah graduated from high school, and she'd thought Bob knew everything about everything. She'd looked up to him, literally and figuratively, with love and admiration. She'd loved his humor and his laughter. She'd loved the way he looked and the way he smelled. Bob, her first love. Her only love. As Bart would have said, she didn't know shit from Shinoda.

Shinola was still present, as Sarah polished another memory. She remembered the glow of Bob's skin after a day at the beach. She remembered a spring day in Alton, when Bob had trained down from Chicago to the Monticello Campus to attend the spring dance. Sarah visualized a miniature Bob striding toward her from the distance, her heart throbbing as he strode closer and became life-size, both of them waving as they ran toward one another. The odor of newly cut grass mingling with Bob's after shave, the warmth of the sun, and Bob's strong arms as he lifted Sarah off the gravel path and swung her full circle.

“I love you, Sarah,” he'd whispered.

“I love you, too.”

“Enough to marry me?”

“Yes.”

On the Venice beach, Sarah drifted into the half-sleep that runs like a river between consciousness and dreams. Her eyes closed, she listened to the sounds of laughter and squeals as children flirted with the surf and big kids flirted with each other. The odor of tuna fish and potato chips from other people's picnics, the sounds of others living in the moment. One series of images played while her memories played another.

Sarah remembered Bob waving a fat envelope at her and shouting, “Hey, hey, I've passed the bar exams!” The weight of the envelope had furnished the good news even before he'd opened the letter of congratulations. What a time to rejoice, after three years

of struggle through law school. The young couple had hugged, kissed, and jumped up and down like children at the shore.

That was a happy memory, Sarah thought, but for the rest, what had happened to those fifties years of “togetherness,” those first ten years of marriage? That decade had been one long round of relatives rapping at the door. A tract house in the suburbs, one car for Bob and no car fare for Sarah. Picking up and scrubbing, sorting and folding, emptying and stacking, while inside Sarah felt empty. Arguments in the living room and making-up in the bedroom. Mass every Sunday. Nervous breakdowns for Elizabeth and measles, mumps, and chicken pox for the twins: Christmas parties, weddings and funerals, bridal showers, baby showers, birthday parties for the twins, and two martini lunches for Bob. Lunch on-the-run for Sarah.

Occasionally, a vivid memory jumped out clear and unjumbled. Sarah remembered bits of conversation and various scenes. Otherwise, those fifties years seemed vague and shadowed, like Eisenhower's presidency. Somehow, in those years of “togetherness” Bob and Sarah had traveled from the nice young newlywed couple to established Vanderville householders. Somehow, they had jumped from one point to another like two people leaping a canyon. The space they covered became a void.

CHAPTER 20

The female animal in heat does emit a scent that attracts the male of the species. The stranger on the beach had called Sarah adorable; men seemed to come at her from out of nowhere. For years she'd felt invisible, but now in the grocery store, the library, or on a street corner, Sarah was conscious that men were eyeballing her shapely, slender legs, and other parts of her anatomy.

By the second week of June, Sarah knew that Bob had grossly exaggerated when he said, "My prick is the biggest and the best." For a woman who had been raised with the myth of three dates before you let a boy kiss you goodnight, and girls who are "easy" never marry, she found herself enjoying the prospect that she could have lovers like the women artists she'd read about.

She'd met him several weeks before her one person show at Harbor College. Jack LaNoue, was the P.R. director-photographer for the college and when he snapped Sarah's picture for the press release, she smiled at him, not the camera.

Jack, had he been Caucasian, would have been a movie double for Clark Gable. He had the same mischievous smile, but his ears were flat, and his teeth were his own. He really was tall, dark and handsome. He looked as though he'd spent his life on the beach and acquired a permanent tan. His features were refined and he wore his curly black hair in an afro. Sarah wondered what his hair would feel like if she touched it.

Jack and Sarah had coffee after the P.R. shoot, each open enough to share that they both had emigrated from Chicago. "I was always glad when it snowed," Jack said. "All that beautiful white stuff covered up the debris that littered the street in front of my house. On a snowy day in January, I'd sit in my fourth-grade classroom on the second floor and watch the El rumble past. I'd listen to the clickity-click-clack and dream of leaving the ghetto on a fast train that would take me into the sunshine. It took me a lot of years, but on my twenty-fifth birthday I took that train I

dreamed about and headed for sunny California. That was ten years ago, and I've never been sorry."

Jack smiled deliciously at Sarah, his snowy white teeth a sharp contrast to his mellow milk chocolate skin. "Sometimes I forget I'm black," he said, "but there is always someone around to remind me! But you don't seem to mind."

"I am aware that our skin color is different, of course, but it makes no difference to me. You could be green for all I care. I'm interested in people, not the shade of their skin."

"Well, that's an artist for you. Artists and photographers get along well."

"All creative people do. We have the same belly button."

"Huh?"

"I mean, creative people recognize each other, share the same spirit. One summer in Maine, a bunch of us from the Art Colony were at the beach. I picked up a smoothed grey-blue stone and held it in the palm of my hand and showed it to my fellow artists. Everyone in the circle nodded and smiled. We all appreciated the beauty without saying one word. We called ourselves 'belly button friends.' I tried that at home in Vanderville and my friends looked at me like I was crazy. One of them even asked, 'So what's the big deal? It's only a stone.'" Sarah looked in Jack's eyes. She knew he understood.

Sarah's opening at Harbor College was only a week away and she wanted to dress like a "real artist." She'd left her mink jacket in Chicago with her mother; she knew how to dress as a lawyer's wife. She'd known how to dress for the St. Agnes Ladies Club: a floppy hat, topped with a silk flower. In Vanderville her one attempt to dress like an artist had backfired. She'd purchased a cotton, brown and black African print house dress, shortened it to mid-thigh, and wore it to a party at her art professor's studio. She hoped she'd fit right in with the "professional" artists. Much to her embarrassment, she was the only guest dressed like an "artist." The other guests were the professor's immediate family, and all the women were dressed in conservative, below the knee suits. Sarah felt more like a hussy than an artist. She didn't want to make the same mistake twice, so she dialed Glo's number and asked for advice.

“I’m not an artist, Sarah. What do I know? Hey, wait a minute. I do. Last year I attended an opening in L.A. It seems to me all the artist’s wore rag-tag hand-me-downs. Why don’t you check out the used clothing stores on San Pedro’s waterfront.”

In one used clothing store, Sarah discovered that she, in her lady-of-the-manor period, had given away clothes that were far cleaner and in much better condition than those being sold. There was no way she would spend her limited funds on someone else’s filthy cast offs.

Discouraged, as she left the fourth run-down shop, she determined she’d try one more store before she gave up and just wore her jeans to the opening. Next door was an antique shop, and Sarah entered, feeling hopeless. Her mood changed when she spied a hand-woven, though thread-bare piano throw from the twenties. She knew this was it. Sure, some of the gold and grey threads hung loose from the hand embroidery, but she knew she could trim them, cut a hole in the center, and slip the throw over her head. It would be quite a skirt, mid-length, with the fringe hanging seductively over her calves.

Sarah wore her “new” skirt and a yellow/gold leotard top to the opening. The uneven waist line of the circle she’d cut in the piano throw was well covered with a wide, purple suede belt and gold buckle from her lady-of-the-manor period. She topped this with her grey suede, wide brimmed hat from the same period and felt like an artist when she parked her car in the Harbor College parking lot. She hoped that Jack would be there. She hadn’t seen him since they shared coffee the day they’d met.

At the college entrance, she was pleasantly surprised to see her name on a large marquee: SHALLOT, ART EXHIBIT. Her father had always enjoyed seeing his name in lights and Sarah looked at her name and thought, I’m a star. At last. Then, chagrined, she realized it wasn’t her name she admired, it was Bob’s. This wasn’t his show! It was hers. She considered using her maiden name in the future, but that wasn’t her name either. It was Bart’s.

Feeling shy and anonymous as she entered the art department, Sarah wondered if anyone would show up for her Saturday afternoon opening. Her spirits were lifted when she saw Jack rush toward her with a warm greeting. “Did you see the marquee, Sarah? I thought I’d surprise

you with that. You look great! If you're not swamped by friends after the show, how about coming over to my apartment? I can fix us a bite to eat and . . .”

“Yes,” Sarah replied, before Jack finished his sentence.

They entered the exhibit together and Jack said, “Your work looks great, too!” Then he excused himself, “I’ve got work to do—I enjoy the photography, but this P.R. crap is a pain in the ass.”

Sarah's art work was tastefully displayed and she appreciated the fact that the curator had installed the show and not left all the work to her. Mr. Curator rushed up to her beaming and asked, “Well, what do you think?”

“Thank you for doing such a great job,” Sarah replied.

Her new creations, simple pen and ink, fine line drawings of fairy-tale heroines had titles like, “Little Miss Muffet,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” They were sharp, happy contrasts to her somber collages and box constructions. With a practiced eye, Sarah scanned her work and, for a change, was pleased with herself.

The one-person show was well attended; and Sarah more than pleased that many of her new acquaintances were in attendance. But she missed Gloria. Glo had given a weak excuse. “Sorry, but my new fella is coming over Saturday night and if I don't clean up this pit, he won't have room to put his arm around me.”

Uncomfortable with small talk, Sarah's eyes circled the room searching for someone she could speak to with ease. She felt a tap on her shoulder and flinched. She couldn't bear to be touched unexpectedly. She turned to see who had touched her and her face lit up with pleasure. “Uncle Josh! How did you know about this?”

“Your mother told me. I flew in from San Francisco this morning just to surprise you.”

Sarah hadn't seen Elizabeth's brother for years and years. She was delighted. Uncle Josh was tall and as elegant and slender as the day he'd chosen her as a dance partner at a family wedding. Remembering waltzing across the dance floor as a ten year old gave Sarah a smile. She fondly embraced her uncle and he whispered in her ear, “You were always my favorite niece.”

“And you taught me how to waltz. You were always my favorite too, Uncle Josh.”

Sarah suddenly realized she'd named one of her sons, Josh, without ever making the connection.

Now, looking vibrant, Sarah's eyes sparkled as she circled the viewing area, shaking hands and thanking each person she spoke to for attending the show. Periodically she felt eyes on her back and turning would find Jack grinning and giving her a thumbs-up gesture.

Excited, Sarah wasn't sure whether it was her show or Jack's attention that caused her pounding heart. When the room was almost empty, and after she'd kissed Uncle Josh good-bye, she walked up to Jack and thanked him once more for her name on the marquee. He slipped her arm through his and said, “Well, are you ready?” and Sarah looked up at him starry eyed, unsure what she was ready for, but certain she was.

Jack accompanied her to the parking lot, helped her into her car, pointed out his red van and said, “Follow me.”

Sarah kept an eye on the van as they entered the Harbor Freeway North, drove closely behind Jack, feeling as excited as a teen-ager on her first date. She admitted to herself that she wanted Jack to make love to her, first date or not. Then fretted that he might just want to be friends. With their first cup of coffee, she'd realized Jack was much younger, eight years in fact. But he didn't seem to mind so why should she? She knew he had a lot more experience; after all, he'd been divorced for six years. He seemed “street wise,” a term she'd picked up from Bart, who certainly was. Sarah wasn't sure what the term meant, but Jack's penetrating eyes seemed to hold the experience she'd recognized in her father's. Jack reminded her of Bart, with his wit, his dark hair, and when he said, “Hey, Baby.” Sarah felt as if she'd known him all her life.

Jack LaNoue's condo in North Hollywood sparkled with chrome and glass. It was a real bachelor pad. Deep piled Swedish throw-rugs in warm shades of orange, lemon, and rust, softened the formality. Jack's photographs, enlarged, matted and framed, dominated the white walls, and “Jocko” dominated his domain.

He hung Sarah's sweater in the front closet and turned on the stereo components, the most elaborate system she'd ever seen. Then he turned down the rheostat, struck a match to rolled papers, kindling and wood in the fireplace, and bright flames hugged the room with warmth.

There were more than two dozen oversized, fat candles in the living room and Jack lit every one. He pushed the repeat button on the stereo and flickering shadows danced on the walls as Jocko held out his arms to Sarah and they merged into one. “You are the sunshine of my life, that's why I'll always be around . . .” words and music came to life as Jack and Sarah swayed to the beat. The beat of Jocko throbbing against Sarah's stomach, her head pressed against his chest, her arms around his back, his arms encircling her body.

Jack shared a joint with Sarah, her first. “I feel like this is the beginning, for I've loved you for a million years.” Jack poured Sarah her first brandy, and she sipped it as she listened to the record repeat, “You are the apple of my eye. . .”

After months and months of loneliness, Sarah ached for love, and she responded with passion to Jack's soft lips on hers. He kissed her gently behind the ear and whispered, “You're so beautiful, my little 'Chatty Cathy.' Relax, sweetheart.”

Why is he whispering? We're alone. Sarah had forgotten that lovers whisper. The last time Bob had whispered to her was on their honeymoon.

Sarah had read about romantic lovers, her daydreams were filled with romance. Now Jack became her quixotic fantasy and her ever-present melancholy thawed with his attention.

“You must have known that I was lonely, because you came to my rescue . . .” Jack's fingers trailed up and down Sarah's spine, as they danced. “You are the apple of my eye,” he hummed along with Stevie Wonder. “You are,” he said, as he nuzzled Sarah's cheek and whispered, “Yeah, Baby.”

When was he going to take her to bed? Over forty-five minutes of tenderness, more foreplay and romance than Sarah had received on her honeymoon. Why was she thinking of Bob now? Comparing? Well, so far Jocko rated a ten and Bob a zero.

“I know this must be heaven . . . so much love inside of me for you . . .” Now, Sarah thought, as Jocko bent her backward in a dip from the waist, the music swirling in her ears. Now, as Jack licked her ear lobe and ran his tongue along the rim. Now as Jocko blew hot breath on Sarah's closed eyelids and gently kissed each one. *Yes! Yes! Now! Now!*

Abruptly Jack pushed Sarah away and onto the leather sofa. He headed toward the kitchen while she sat on the edge of the couch wondering what she'd done wrong. Had she misread Jack's intentions? Maybe he wouldn't take her to bed at all.

Returning, Jack balanced a round wooden tray with one hand like an experienced waiter. Laughing, he said, "I learned this trick when I worked my way through college." He laid the tray on the travertine coffee table, removed the crystal decanter and two crystal wine glasses. Sitting close to Sarah he whispered, "Relax, Baby," then he poured the wine, clinked his glass to hers, and toasted, "To my dear little one. To my Baby."

Between toasts, Jack blew on one candle and then another until they sputtered and burst again into flame. *Now!* Sarah thought, as Jack placed both crystal glasses back on the tray and pushed it to the far end of the coffee table.

Turning to Sarah he gently pushed her backward onto the soft leather and pressed his lithe body down upon her. He pressed his lips hard against her open mouth, his tongue curling on hers, as he pulled the clinging material of her leotard down to expose her breasts. Jack's tongue found her nipple while he used one hand to slip Sarah's skirt above her knees and the other to unsnap the crotch of her leotard. He gently rubbed his fingertip back and forth across her clitoris while he devoured her breast. Sarah's heart pounded wildly, her breath coming in spurts when at last Jack entered her. His enormous penis touched spots inside her that had never been reached before. Their bodies, joined together at last, rose and fell as one.

Jack made delicious love to Sarah on the sofa with half her clothes on. He made love to her on the floor without her leotard and piano-skirt and titillated the lips of Sarah's vagina with his practiced tongue. He made love to her naked in his bed, on top of the covers, and under the covers, and then he made love to her again while the record played over and over, "You are the sunshine of my life, that's why I'll always be around you . . . I feel like this is the beginning . . ."

In the morning, Sarah awoke in Jack's bed and found him standing over her, a sweet smile of satisfaction on his face as he said, "You are the most sensuous, sexy woman I've ever met."

"I am?"

“You know it.”

“No, I don't. Tell me again.”

“I just did.”

Jack prepared breakfast, without Sarah's help. She stood near him at the stove while he flipped pancakes, admiring his bare shoulders, his back, his hands. Admiration for this “tall, dark, and handsome” man, the second lover of her life, who had shown her what love-making could be. Sarah hadn't heard the expression, “Once you've had black, you'll never go back,” but now she would have understood the merit of the cliché.

Sarah, dressed in one of Jocko's snow-white T-shirts, set the coffee table in the living room with forks and napkins. She picked up her panties, leotard, and skirt from the living room floor, and folded them neatly at the end of the white leather sofa. Jack carried in a larger wooden tray filled with stacks of pancakes, melted butter pooling down the sides, and a small silver pitcher filled with warmed maple syrup. The lover's ate in silence, only their eyes spoke. They finished breakfast at 10:00 and returned to bed where they played and giggled, made love, slept, and made love once more. At 2:00 P.M. Jocko, cradling Sarah in his arms said, “We've got to get up.”

“Why?”

“I have got to accomplish *some* work today.” Sitting up, he stepped out of bed and said, “Come on, Sarah, get up.” Sarah remained in the same curled position and Jack scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the bathroom and placed her on the closed toilet seat. He turned on the shower, tested the temperature with his hand and at perfection, picked her up once more and stepped into the blue tiled shower with Sarah in his arms. He stood her up under the spray, rubbed soap between his palms and caressed her body with his soft, soapy hands.

“Sarah, you have a beautiful body, and a sweet ass,” Jack said, while gently turning her around to face him. He continued soaping her and added, “You have a sweet smile and a gorgeous tummy.”

Sarah looked down at her stomach and said, “With these scars, you've got to be kidding.”

Jack touched the top of her scar and with a gentle forefinger, traced the path from belly button to pubis. “No one sees that scar as ugly but you, Sarah,” he said, as he poured shampoo into his palm, and began working up a lather in her hair. He massaged her scalp, her neck, and her shoulders, then he said, “Close your eyes, Baby, I’m going to rinse you off.”

Sarah’s eyes closed, and with slippery arms around Jack’s waist, she chortled, “I’ve never been happier in my whole life.”

“Shut up, Baby, or you’ll drown,” Jack laughed, as he pulled Sarah close and brushed water from her wet body with both hands. “Stand still while I soap up,” he ordered.

Sarah grabbed for the soap, “No, let me suds you,” she said, as the soap slipped between Jack’s fingers and landed on the tile floor. Bending over to retrieve it, Jack chuckled, “Beware of Greeks!” Sarah didn’t get the joke or understand why Jack refused to allow her to wash him until he said, “No, Baby. Today’s your day to be pampered. We’ll see next time.”

Sarah seized Jack’s last words and held on for dear life as he helped her out of the shower and lifted her on top of the toilet seat again. He rubbed her skin to a warm glow with a soft Turkish towel, then reached behind him for a fresh one and towel-dried her hair. He pushed Sarah’s hair into soft waves, wrapped the towel around her head, turban style, and chuckled, “You look like Ingres’ Odalisque. You are a truly beautiful woman. The light in your soul glows out through your eyes. Why won’t you believe it?”

“My mother told me people only give me compliments because they want to be my friend, and not to believe what they say.”

“Your mother is full of shit! You are beautiful. Believe it!”

An hour later Jack held Sarah in his arms at the front door, kissed the top of her head and said, “I’ll be talking to you.”

The long drive from West Hollywood to San Pedro seemed only minutes as Sarah replayed every second of Jack’s attentiveness. Over and over his last words, “I’ll be talking to you,” scorched her brain and she wondered . . . when?

CHAPTER 21

For three long days Sarah waited in vain for Jack's call. When she left her apartment to run a necessary errand, she left the phone off the hook, hoping that if the line were busy Jack would call back. By the fourth day Sarah was certain that Jack would never call and she fretted, afraid that she'd made a terrible mistake allowing Jack to make love to her on their first date. On the fifth day after her "all night stand," her anxiety lifted when she heard her lover's voice on the phone.

"Hi, Baby. I've been in San Francisco on a shoot."

"When did that happen?" Sarah asked, her voice filled with surprise and relief.

"On Sunday, right after you left. I got a call from a client, packed a bag and caught the next flight. Anyway, I'm home now and working late at Harbor. Want some company?"

"Sure. Come on over. How soon will you be here?"

"In a while."

"Okay, see you . . ."

"Wait, don't hang up. I need your address."

Sarah hung up the phone all smiles. During the months that followed, Sarah's ringing phone meant promise and she rushed to answer, hoping it was Jack. Several times a week it was. First Jack and Sarah were lovers; now over the drowsy summer they'd become friends.

Sarah considered Jack her "steady." He knew he had to "cool it" before he became too emotionally involved. Yet, his face mirrored his admiration and respect for Sarah and gave her a high she hadn't experienced since she and Bob had courted.

Sarah's taut features softened in her studio when she shared her career dreams with Jack. "I want my work displayed in the New York's Whitney Museum. My friends

say I'm courageous continuing with my art under the circumstances. But it's not courage. I don't know how to do anything else.”

So the summer passed and Jack and Sarah talked of art and roses until they could discuss almost anything. It seemed to Sarah that the closer they became emotionally, the less Jack wanted to sleep with her, but she was afraid to confront him. Her words were often a reflection of her sexual thoughts.

“Jack, has it ever occurred to you that every weapon man has invented—the knife, the spear, the arrow, the gun, and cannon— every weapon is a phallic symbol? What that amounts to is who’s got the biggest prick!”

“Think of the alternative, a giant vacuum cleaner sweeping up the battlefield.”

They laughed and wiped their eyes. They laughed and blew their noses. They laughed until they were too spent to laugh anymore. Sarah finally found her voice and said, “Jack, you are the funniest man I've ever met, next to my father.” Then she told him another one of Bart's stories and they broke up with laughter again.

By the middle of August, Sarah and Jack had talked in depth about everything, except sex. She wanted more action and he wanted less. One night he arrived with his usual bottle of wine, but he also carried two prime steaks. He followed Sarah around the tiny kitchen talking to her while she peeled and sliced potatoes, fried the steaks, set the table, and served dinner. While Jack talked through the entire meal, his words did not interrupt Sarah’s thoughts. Her eyes became the camera that photographed her lover. She studied his long tapering fingers encircling a dinner roll, the way the bridge of his nose wrinkled when he laughed at something she’d said. Her eyes roamed his strong jaw, perfect nose and gleaming white teeth. She lingered on his sensuous lips and wished it was her finger he put in his mouth and not another French fry.

Now, as Jack reached for the last fry, he looked at Sarah and asked, “Where’s your head? You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said. That’s not like you.”

Sarah laid her fork and knife across her dinner plate and said, “Thanks for the steaks—I haven't had one since I left Vanderville. I appreciate all the things you do for

me—at least twice a week you're here lifting something that's too heavy for me, dragging out the garbage, or pounding a nail in here and there. You give me advice on how to make it as a single and I appreciate and thank you very much.” Without pausing for breath, she added, “Why don't you want to make love to me anymore?”

Jack ignored her question, pushed himself up from the floor, and stared at Sarah in disbelief. He walked to the couch and removed his black ankle-high leather boots, making himself comfortably at home. “Hey, Sarah,” he said, “I forgot to bring my wine glass. Bring it to me.”

Sarah handed Jack his half-filled wine glass and glared down at him. “Damnit, Jack, am I ugly? Undesirable? Is that why you won't sleep with me anymore? Bob made me feel less than a worm. With you, I don't feel as stupid or inarticulate as he'd convinced me I was, but you don't want me physically any more than he did, and that hurts.” Sarah's words tumbled over each other as she tried to make Jack understand her need to be physically loved.

Jack paired up his boots near the couch and headed toward the kitchen to refill his wine glass. Looking back, he said, “Sarah, I cannot understand why you can't see who you really are. You have so much going for you: looks, talent, personality. Why do you put yourself down by begging me to sleep with you? Why is it taking you so long to value yourself? You are the strongest woman I've ever met. Why won't you believe it?”

“So that's it! You can't cope with a strong woman sexually. You can't make love to an emotional and intellectual equal.” Sarah glowered over Jack, who sat at the edge of the “make do” couch. He reached for her hand and gently pulled her down beside him. Still holding her hand, he looked into her eyes and declared, “You haven't heard a word I've said, but I want you to hear this. I love your head, Sarah. I love you. I want us to be friends forever, but sexually we just don't fit.”

“Are you crazy?” Sarah said, pulling away from him. “Fit! After the nights we've spent together?”

“I'm sorry, Sarah, but that's how I feel,” Jack said, and reached for her hand again. “It's up to you whether you want to stay friends or not, but it will be a friendship without sex.”

Sarah leaped to her feet and left Jack's hand dangling in mid-air. “Damn you, Jack! I could have handled a sexless friendship if that was how it started, but not now. I'm a head, heart, and body, and you just want my head and heart. I can't deal with it. I won't deal with it.”

Sarah walked to her front door, opened it and said, “Goodnight, Jack. You get all of me or nothing.” Five minutes later Jack was gone and Sarah, too angry to cry, knelt on the living room carpet and beat her fists into the yellow bean bag. Frustrated, hurt, and angry, she screamed and cursed and didn't give a damn if the neighbors heard the commotion. Finally, in tears, she collapsed on the carpet and swore she'd never love another man. Burned once was rotten, but twice was too much! She cursed Jack. She cursed Bob. “What's wrong with me?” she moaned, and the words of her father's theme song filled the emptiness. “Love'em in the morning, kiss 'em in the night. Give 'em plenty loven, Honey, treat him right . . .”

Sarah missed Jack desperately, but she “stuck to her guns” and refused to call him as she usually did after a disagreement. By the end of the second week of separation, Jack called at 9:30 on a Friday night and asked, “Do you want to come over to my apartment tonight?”

“Yes.”

Sarah, already in her pajamas, hurriedly dressed and drove the Harbor Freeway heading for the Hollywood Hills. When she arrived at Jack's apartment it was almost 11:00. They sat on the sofa and talked as if nothing had happened between them. No anger or hostility, just two good friends sharing their lives. Jack lit a joint to share with Sarah and they drank white wine until Sarah headed for the bathroom. Jack followed her and handed her a toothbrush saying, “Here, brush your teeth, you smell of cigarettes.”

Sarah meekly accepted the toothbrush; accepting Jack on whatever terms he offered. That night Jack fucked Sarah once—he didn't make love to her at all.

A week later Sarah called Jack and asked him to come to her apartment on Saturday afternoon. When he arrived, she told him calmly, without emotion, “We are both too first-rate to be second-rate with each other. I don't understand why you don't want me physically, but I accept your friendship on your terms.” Jack and Sarah renegotiated a new contract, this one based solely on friendship. The friendship was sealed with Jack's pronouncement, “Sarah, you don't have to be in love with everyone you sleep with. All divorcees think that.”

“Jack, I'm not divorced, and I love you.”

“That's what you think now, Sarah. You'll see.”

“I'll tell you one thing I see. With all the women you've known, Jack, there must have been one, in the six years since your divorce, one you could love. I'm not talking about me. What I'm saying is, if you haven't connected with anyone in six years it's because you're afraid of intimacy. If you don't want to end up like that jerk in *Shampoo*, you'd better think about what I've said.”

“I will, but you think about what I said. You can sleep with a man without being in love.”

Sarah, neither a flirt nor a prick teaser, honest till it hurt, had thrown herself at Jack and been rejected. Her self-pity was palpable.

She complained to Gloria, and Glo consoled her. “Your problem is that you stay home alone too much. You think too much. There are plenty of fish in the sea. Come to a party with me Friday night, you'll see for yourself.”

“Glo, you're young, you're cute. I'm old and I'm not. I'm no fun, especially at a party. Everyone gets drunk and I'm sober. After midnight there's no one to talk to. I don't like talking to drunks.”

“I'm not talking about that kind of party. Friday night there's a party at a minister's house.”

“A minister's house? You're a real Jew. Why would we go to a minister's party?”

“Trust me, Sarah.”

With misgivings, Sarah acquiesced. After the phone conversation, she visualized Gloria: a Jew with red hair and a pug nose! Gloria looked petite while sitting, when she stood she looked hinged in the middle, slender on top, wide on the bottom. Gloria laughed about her half-hour-glass figure, why couldn't Sarah laugh at her skinny bod. She did look like a damn swizzle stick. Well, a curvaceous swizzle stick!

On the way home from the party at the minister's house, Gloria drove in silence and Sarah raved on and on. “That party—party, that's a euphemism—that meat market was disgusting. Why didn't you tell me it was a singles party? I should have caught on at the door when you took one step toward the doorbell and two steps back. You didn't want to attend any more than I did. For God's sake, the men should have had pricks for noses the way they leered. One jerk pinched my ass when I walked past him. And those stupid games they played. Falling backward into a stranger's arms. The stupid idiot I had for a partner didn't catch me until I was an inch from the floor. He scared the shit out of me. When I caught my breath, the ass said, 'You're the most trusting woman I've ever met.' Not trusting, Gloria, stupid. Don't ask me to anything like that ever again.”

Next Gloria suggested a private party in Palos Verdes. “Not for singles, Sarah, I promise, but I promise I'll introduce you to men.”

After the party Sarah once again raved on the drive home, this time with exultation “What a party! I wish Louise could have been there. What a house! She would have loved it. And the art collection. I wandered from room to room looking at fabulous originals. My God, Gloria, they even had a Braque. I did meet a beautiful man. I thought he showed interest the way he looked in my eyes. I rattled on and on, describing the art collection, when in my head I had us walking down the aisle. I felt like a fool when he told me he was the host. For God's sake, he owned the art I raved about. I used to be good with strangers, all those political parties, but without Bob as my backup, I don't even know how to behave.”

The night Gloria dragged Sarah to a single's bar in Redondo Beach, her spirit was really broken. She left Rubins feeling old, ugly, and very undesirable—no one had asked her to dance, no one had spoken to her. El's words droned in her ears, “Even your father thinks bar people are disgusting. He never allows us in his places. Only cheap girls drink, and . . .”

On the drive home, Glo at the wheel as usual, had her turn. She rattled on about the ball she'd had, all her dancing partners, while Sarah tuned her out and thought about the women she'd seen sitting at the bar while she sat alone at a table. They weren't B-girls, just separated and divorced women batting their eyelashes, sidling up to men and patting their thighs. Sarah had watched the mini-skirted waitress, all business, hold her bills between her thumb and forefinger. The waitress looked as hard as any B-girl Bart had ever hired, and so did most of the women patrons.

“Gloria, don't ever ask me to a single's bar again. That's my first and last time at Rubins. I hate bars. I left Bob to find a better life, and this is much worse. Sometimes I wish I were dead.”

Back in her apartment, Sarah wandered back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom. She glanced at the clock. Midnight. “Oh, what the hell,” and she dialed her old phone number.

“Bob? It's me.”

“Sarah? Sarah, for God's sake, it's two in the morning here.”

“Did I wake you?”

“Of course you woke me. What the hell did you think?”

“When we lived together, you said you never slept, just roamed around the house all night.”

“For Christ's sake, Sarah, don't start.” And then in a softer voice asked, “Are you all right? What's the matter? Why are you calling?”

The concern in Bob's voice triggered Sarah's miseries, and she teared up.

“Sarah, Honey,” Bob's voice softer still. “What is it?”

“I miss you, Bob.”

“I miss you, too. Are you having a bad time?”

“Yes.” Sarah grabbed a tissue and blew her nose. “I love you, Bob. Come and get me. Please come. Save me.”

“Sarah, sweetheart, you sound terrible. I wish I could. But I'm up to my neck in the office.”

Sarah blew her nose again and blubbered into the phone. “Oh, Bob.”

“Okay, Sarah. I can't come this week, but I'll work my tail off and maybe next week, or at least by the end of the month—September, that's the month we met, remember? —I'll call you in a couple of days and let you know when I can fly out to L.A. We probably should have a talk.”

Sarah hung up feeling unsettled and wandered from the living room to the bedroom and back. Of course she remembered when they met. She knew the exact date—September 1st. Talking to Bob had increased her vulnerability and she berated herself for making the call. Sarah, like the slapped child who pulls at her mother's skirt, cried for love.

In the morning, a dry-eyed Sarah dialed Bob's office number. “Hi, Bob. Good morning.”

“Thank God, Sarah, you sound much better.”

“Sorry about last night—waking you up—I shouldn't have called. I'm calling you now to let you off the hook. I appreciate your being there for me, but you don't have to come to California. I'm all right.”

“Thanks for letting me know. Right now I've got a client in the office. I'll talk to you later. Bye,” Bob said, and hung up.

Sarah looked at the dead phone in her hand. Later? Today, tomorrow, next week? She remained in limbo for the rest of September, and when another month passed and she'd had no word from Bob, not so much as a note with his tardy check, she forced his hand. She wrote to him and demanded a ten dollar increase in her weekly check or, “I

want a divorce.” Ten dollars was an insignificant amount and only an excuse. So was the threat of divorce. What she wanted was Bob's declaration of love.

Sarah had sewn her “wild oats”—if men could, why couldn't she? Bob had an affair and so had Sarah. Now they were even. She'd played at “single” and found it double trouble. Now she wanted to go home. To Bob. Too bad Sarah had never learned to ask clearly for what she wanted. It was the rare woman of Sarah's generation who ever could.

Less than ten days later, Sarah held Bob's unopened letter with trembling hands. Intuitively she knew that one way or another, her life would be changed when she read the envelope's contents. She settled in her rocker, turned the envelope over and over, rocked awhile, and finally opened it. Intuition or not, nothing prepared Sarah for the shock of the opening sentence: “I will not, I repeat will not, send you ten dollars more a week, or five or one. I've decided we should get divorced. It's only fitting that after all our years of bickering over money that the decision to divorce should be over ten dollars.”

Sarah rocked back and forth, her hands shaking as she read and reread the letter, trying to read between the lines was exhausting. Shock kept her dry-eyed, but she kept repeating, “A divorce! A divorce?”

She read the letter three times over and the paragraph that really inflamed her read:

“After I received your letter, Sarah, I did the soul searching I've been avoiding. Your letter forced me to, and now I'll tell you the truth—things I've kept to myself for fear of hurting you. But you've asked for it. Your rotten childhood finally caught up with you. Anyone with less courage would never have come so far in their development. Most people reach a level of growth and stay there for the rest of their lives. That's what's happened to you. Only a genius continues to grow for the rest of his—in your case, her—life.”

Sarah reread the letter one more time, mulled over what her response would be, then shipped off an angry reply.

“Okay, a divorce, Bob, but don't rub your flies off on me! I'm not the one who bought out the stores—you have more clothes and shoes than one person could wear in a lifetime—and you prefer a divorce, rather than cough up ten dollars more a week. Now that's *real* maturity! Was it your “rotten childhood” that caught up with you—lying in Johnny's bed hour after hour listening to adolescent rock and roll. “Furthermore, by your definition, I'm a genius. I'm still growing, as painful as it is.”

Sarah didn't have to wait another ten days for a response. Bob called her as soon as he received her letter. “Sarah, I've read your letter, and you're full of shit, but I'll tell you this, I'm not sending you another penny until you file for divorce. If you don't want to, I will.”

“On what grounds? That I got upset when you slept with Lorraine?”

“You can be as sarcastic as you want, but until you file I'm not sending you any more money.”

“What's your hurry, Bob? We've been married twenty-five years, and you want a divorce before we've even been separated for a year.”

“It's no good this way, Sarah. No one wants to pay for a horse after it's run out of the barn.”

“If I'm a horse, you're a horse's ass!”

“This is getting us nowhere. FILE!” Bob snarled and hung up.

Sarah had been hoisted by her own petard. Bob always said he hated divorce work, and now he wanted one of his own. What was his hurry? Was there another woman?

Sarah knew just the lawyer to call for advice. His name was Arnie Goldsteen. She'd met him at a house party in Beverly Hills. He'd come to the costume party dressed as an Arab chieftain, a flowing caftan covered the stomach that preceded him by a month.

If a Jew had that kind of chutzpah, he'd be able to handle lawyer Bob. Or so Sarah thought. First, however, she'd have to find the money for an appointment.

She dialed Elizabeth's number, and after the usual formalities—I'm fine, how are you—she broached the subject. “Well, ah, Mom, you said if I needed help . . . could you lend me some money?”

“What for? You never were a good manager. Bob sends you \$140 a week. I live on less than that myself.”

“Never mind.”

“Sarah, you're not going out with any bums, are you?”

CHAPTER 22

The day was clear. White puffs of cloud hugged the mountain top and roamed across the crescent in surrender to fall. Sarah rested her back against one of the upper steps leading to her apartment, her legs flat against the step below. She stared at the chipped banister and brushed off flakes of green paint that had blown onto her jeans. She wondered if there was any wood at all under those chipped layers of gray, brown, and green.

Sarah shifted her position and leaned back against the clapboard siding; through the balusters she stared at the bent stem of one poinsettia plant, a Christmas gift from the twins. She remembered scraping away debris near the fence and planting that flower in a pinch of earth. The poinsettia had grown and flourished until her landlord dropped his wooden ladder. That's when the stem snapped. Now the bright red flower lay wilted on a broken bottle. The damaged stem, tenacious and green, clung to the poinsettia, while the plant's roots lay open and exposed to the sun.

Bob hadn't sent his check in over two weeks, and she'd called him on it. He'd shouted into the phone, "You can scream till you're blue in the face. I'm not sending you another cent until your lawyer files."

Sarah didn't want a divorce. She wanted Bob to change his behavior. Sarah had played at her poverty lifestyle through the long months of separation, believing all the while that Bob would come to his senses. Bob's harsh words ended any hope that might have remained. Aware now that she might live in poverty for the rest of her life, Sarah shuddered. Chilled to the bone, she wrapped her sweater tight across her breast.

Only \$400 of her original \$700 nest egg remained untouched. In the past two checkless weeks, she'd spent \$300 on living expenses. If her lawyer, Arnie Goldstein, didn't contact Bob soon and force him to send her checks, she had visions of ending up a bag lady, sleeping on a park bench.

Sarah had her first and only *free* consultation with “Please call me Arnie” a few days after Bob insisted she retain a lawyer. Goldstein assured her, “Don't worry about fees. Yes, you will have to pay to file for divorce, but the judge will force your soon-to-be ex to pay my fees.”

“How much will that be?”

“Don't bother your pretty little head about that. We have other things to talk about, like . . .”

Before he could finish his sentence, Arnie answered several urgent phone calls. Knowing that lawyers charged by the hour, Sarah fervently hoped it would be Bob who paid for the divorce—after all, it was his idea. He wouldn't have legal fees; he'd act as his own attorney.

Finally off the phone, Arnie addressed his wife-and-acting-secretary with the same arrogant tone Bob had used when Sarah worked in his office. Sarah looked at Mrs. Goldstein and wanted to warn her—be on guard, when your husband's through using you, you could be dumped.

His lawyership finally cast his full attention on Sarah, the client sitting across from him. “Sorry about all this, it's been one of those days. Now, about your divorce. We'll have to file in Illinois and we'll need a Chicago lawyer for that.”

“But I live in California.”

“Yes, in this state we could file for community property and in Illinois divorce laws are still in the dark ages and no settlement is certain, but the divorce has to be filed in Illinois, that's the law. Before women's lib, your twenty-six years

of marriage would have counted for something and you'd almost be guaranteed adequate alimony. Now it will depend on the judge.

Sarah swallowed hard. As nervous as she felt, she refused to lose her composure as Arnie explained in endless detail, "Without a doubt, there will be a fight over the settlement, so prepare yourself for battle."

Sarah chipped away another layer of paint, flicked it away with her fingernail, and sighed in resignation. It was time to call Arnie and find out if he'd contacted a Chicago attorney. They'd better get a move on before her savings evaporated. The only good news she'd heard from Arnie was that he'd have the Chicago attorney file for temporary alimony and Bob would be forced to send her checks. The bad new was, she'd have to fly to Chicago.

Estimating her expenses: plane fare, plus . . . Sarah consoled herself, at least she wouldn't have the expense of a hotel, she'd stay with John and his wife. The thought of holding her grandson for the first time brought a smile. Looking at little Carl's picture was not the same as holding him in her arms. The fact that Sarah had to fly thousands of miles for the privilege seemed unfair. On the other hand, Sarah wasn't stuck baby-sitting; her new-found freedom did have its appeal.

But freedom for what? Freedom to starve? Since Sarah's arrival in California, her art work had been included in three juried shows, and not one of her creations had sold. Now that divorce was a reality, she worried about her future. She was no longer a wife, mother, or lover. She wasn't even certain she wanted to continue pursuing a career in the art world, but if she gave up that dream, she'd have *nothing* to live for.

In Vanderville, Sarah painted colorful abstractions that sold. There she'd banked the money to use for art supplies, art books, and gifts for Bob and the twins. Those earnings didn't have to cover rent and groceries. The thought of once again painting pleasing pictures that matched someone's carpeting or drapes repelled

Sarah, but she'd discovered that her truth in art wasn't salable. If she were to find meaning in her work, she'd have to be content living in poverty. Sarah shuddered as she looked at the litter-strewn backyard and watched a wind gust fan a newspaper against the clapboard siding of the house that blocked her view to the street.

Her landlord, like her husband, was a liar. They'd both made promises they didn't keep. When Sarah moved in, almost a year ago, Bill said, "Be patient, just bear with the mess, I'll have everything finished by March." Here it was November and she still froze in the unfinished studio. Her apartment was barely tolerable. Jack called the "brown things" cockroaches and Sarah cringed when she heard the word. Sarah couldn't count the times she'd emptied all the kitchen cabinets, the bedroom closet, and the dresser drawers so Bill could spray. Her landlord was too cheap to hire an exterminator and Sarah put up with the inconvenience until the night a roach scooted by as she entered her bedroom—the one place she'd considered safe. She'd let out a deep, blood-curdling scream, grabbed the Raid can and sprayed and sprayed and sprayed. The lethal liquid was everywhere; on the floor, the walls, the ceiling, the mattress, and the dresser. She didn't stop spraying until the can was empty and she was coughing from the fumes.

In the morning she'd called Bill and announced, "I've hired an exterminator and I'm deducting his bill from next month's rent." Bill sputtered and raised his voice in objections, but Sarah remained adamant. She'd confronted a liar and won. Were all men liars? Bart had lied to Elizabeth, but had he ever lied to his daughter? No, Sarah thought, he taught me to value honesty.

* * *

Bart flicked a wide cigar ash on top of his mashed potatoes, pushed his dinner plate away, and leaned toward Sarah who was sitting at his right. "Now listen up, Sarah, I have a story for you. I was an eighth grader like my friend, Freddy. He had this brilliant plan to torment this sissy-boy in our class. That kid

had pimples on his pimples—he was so fat his chin had chins.” Bart's double chin jiggled with his laughter.

“That sissy-boy was sitting in the crapper when Freddy and I burst in. There he was, sitting on the toilet, his underwear around his ankles, whimpering at the sight of us. Freddy pinned him down and I smeared mustard and catsup all over his thing. *That* was some hot-dog!” Bart laughed, as he smeared imaginary mustard and catsup with his real dinner knife. He laughed with such gusto he had to wipe his eyes with his napkin.

“Sarah, we stuffed that mustard and catsup frankfurter into a bun while that sissy cried like a baby. Freddy and I stood over him laughing our heads off. Then we ran, like bats out of hell.”

Bart's eyes sparkled, his face the mirror of a mischievous boy, his hardy laughter, baritone. “Now listen up, Sarah,” he said, “I'm coming to the important part. That sissy-boy went tattling to the principal!” Bart waved his finger under Sarah's nose, raised his voice, and said with conviction, “*Never be a tattletale!*”

Then he leaned back and said, “When the principal heard about our stunt he announced over the loud speaker, 'If the culprit will come forward and confess, we will have our Halloween Party tomorrow. Otherwise, the party will be canceled!'”

“I was scared shitless, but I didn't want the party called off because of me; so I marched right into Mr. Cutler's office and confessed. I didn't tattle on Freddy, I said, I did it.”

Now Bart's eyes had a serious expression, as he leaned closer to Sarah and said, “And you know what? Instead of being punished, I was rewarded for telling the truth. We had the Halloween Party, and all the kids thought I was a hero. Now listen closely to what I'm going to tell you—it's important. No matter what you ever do, you must always tell the truth.”

* * *

Sarah sat on the steps, a smile tickling the corners of her mouth as she thought about her father. As a teenager, half the time she'd been embarrassed introducing him to her friends for fear his "damn, hell, or shit" would offend. Now people said, "fuck" in mixed company, and that was a word he'd never used. Sarah's new friends would have appreciated Bart's wit, and no way would they have found his choice of words offensive. He wasn't a phony, he was genuine. He'd chosen his own course. Bart was ahead of his time.

With insight, Sarah realized she'd picked up her judgmental attitude from her mother. Everyone else said, "Bart's a great guy," while Elizabeth reminded him of his shortcomings. How often had she said, "At least *my* relatives are refined."

"Yeah, they're refined," Bart would counter, "but they are B-O-R-I-N-G." Sarah thought so, too. Bart's family might not be refined, but they were far more entertaining than Elizabeth's.

Bart never told a locker room joke, it was his language that was colorful. He'd often said things that Sarah didn't understand, but if he laughed, so did she. And Elizabeth, no matter how she complained about Bart's subject matter, laughed right along with her husband and daughter.

Her legs stiff from sitting in one position, Sarah rose to stretch, her thoughts still inward as she considered the rewards of honesty. Bart's story had taught her not to lie, and now Jack told her she must.

Extending her right arm, Sarah heard the joint crack, and remembered the many times she'd watched her father do the same thing. He'd thrust out his arm, listen to the pop and say, "When I was a kid I fell out of a tree and broke my arm. Climbing trees was forbidden so I never told my parents and the break never was set."

Resuming her position on the steps, Sarah thought about her grandparents. Grandpa Mindel died before she was born, and Grandma Mindel died when she was four, so she knew very little about either one of them. All she remembered

about her grandmother were her highly rouged cheeks, layers of beads around her neck, and a ring on every finger. She surmised, however, that they must have been very strict if their son was afraid to report a broken arm.

Elizabeth was very strict, but Sarah knew she could have told her mother she'd broken her arm. But, under her mother's watchful eye, it would have been impossible for Sarah to break a bone. Hell, she hadn't even climbed a tree until she was past forty. She'd never been allowed to play "rough" like the other kids. Elizabeth's rules were inflexible.

As a senior in high school, Sarah's bedtime was promptly at 10:00 P.M., not one minute later or Elizabeth would yell from her bedroom across the hall, "Turn those lights out. Now!" Dinner time was exactly at 6:00 P.M., no excuses.

Sarah was sixteen before she was allowed in a car with a boyfriend at the wheel. On weekends her dates had to have her home promptly at midnight, and after every date Elizabeth would call from her bedroom, "Come in here. I want to talk to you."

Reluctantly, Sarah would walk into her mother's room, sit on the edge of the bed, hoping that this time her mother would ask her if she'd had a good time. Instead Elizabeth immediately began her interrogation, "He didn't touch you, or anything?" she'd ask, as she had the week before, and the week before that.

Sarah would squirm with embarrassment under her mother's cross-examination, her eyes tracing a pattern on the carpeting. No date had touched her, yet she felt violated. "Look me in the eye when I talk to you," Elizabeth would demand. "Tell me the truth. Did he touch you?" Elizabeth demanded truth, but she lied whenever it served her purpose.

Sarah's friend Natalie finally changed the weekly ritual. The two girls had double-dated one Saturday night, and Nat was sleeping over. When Elizabeth called her daughter in to report, Natalie said, "You don't have to tell your mother anything. You have a right to your own personal business." That night Sarah

refused to answer her mother's questions. El had a fit, but she never again called Sarah into her bedroom to report.

Nat knew she had a right to privacy. In Elizabeth's house, only she had rights. When Sarah was seventeen, she'd politely asked her mother to knock before entering her bedroom, rather than bursting in unannounced. Outraged, Elizabeth raised her voice and said emphatically, "This is *my* house. I can go into any room I want. If you don't like it, find yourself another place to live."

After Bart's death, Elizabeth thought she had new ammunition to threaten her daughter. She implied, not too subtly, that unless Sarah did her bidding she'd be disinherited. Sarah didn't give a hoot about any inheritance, but now that she was on her own, money—or rather the lack of it—was always on her mind.

Sarah squashed what remained of her cigarette on the sole of her shoe and, pocketing the butt, realized that if she were this insecure about money when she had only herself to support, how insecure her father and husband must have been with families to feed and clothe.

Like them, she was constantly on the run trying to earn a buck: part-time work in an optometrist's office, teaching art to children on Saturdays, visiting galleries trying to convince the owner to handle her art. To accomplish anything, Sarah needed to set priorities, but there was always so much to do: clean the apartment, take clothes to the laundromat, finish her homework.

Sarah recrossed her legs for the umpteenth time, put her elbow on her knee, and rested her face on her fist, mimicking Rodin's sculpture. She knew she should go inside and finish her Philosophy of Art term paper, but she wasn't ready to face that battle. Sarah enjoyed the class, but resented the nun who taught it. She didn't even look like a nun, dressed in her sweaters and short skirts. What did she know about the struggles of an artist; her bed and board were paid for. It was tough keeping alive creatively without financial or emotional support, especially when

Elizabeth kept repeating, "Give it up. You can't afford to be an artist any more than I can."

Elizabeth's early morning phone call still rankled. The phone had rung at 6:00 A.M., once again El had refused to consider that it was two hours later in Chicago. Her eyes barely open, Sarah had listened to El's repetitious remarks, "Stop trying to be an artist. Stop playing at those foolish part-time jobs. Stop playing in your studio and get a real job. You worked in Bob's office. You know secretarial work. I was a secretary before I married, and I made good money. I could always afford a new hat. You should have listened to me. I told you to take shorthand in high school. But then, you never listen to me."

Yeah, El was a secretary; for at least six months. For over twenty years she'd lived off the money Bart had left her. Sarah had worked in Bob's office as a secretary, but he never paid her a dime or gave her a thank you.

* * *

"For God's sake, speed it up," Bob said, glaring at Sarah bent over the brief she was typing at the secretary's desk. "Why the hell does Elsie always get sick every time I have a rush job? Damn it, Sarah, hurry up, I'll be late for court. If I miss my train, I'll... How many pages do you have left to type?"

"Five," Sarah said, without looking up from the typewriter.

"Jesus, get a move on."

Sarah bit her tongue and kept on typing. Bob was as demanding at the office as he was at home. What if a client walked in and heard him ranting and raving. She wasn't his slave. Or was she? Sarah released the typewriter's paper lever and shoved in a fresh sheet of bond, seven sheets of carbon paper and seven second sheets.

Three-quarters of an hour later, Sarah's fingers were still racing across the typewriter keys, her tears unwiped on her cheeks, the rat-tat-tat of the machine droning in her ears. Deep in concentration she didn't hear Bob breathing at her

side. His words startled her and she flinched. "I'm sorry I've been rushing you, Honey," he said. "Why are you crying? For God's sake, stop typing a minute and answer me."

Sarah's eyes remained fixed on the last page of the twenty-page brief. "It's okay, Bob," she said, without looking up. "It's just that my shoulders and hands hurt from this steady typing. I know you have to catch a train. I'm not angry at you."

Bob bent and kissed the top of Sarah's head and said, "Honey, you can't stop now. I need that brief."

Sarah smiled at Bob's back as he returned to his office. He worked so hard, she couldn't let him miss his train. Tears streaked Sarah's make-up and she stopped typing long enough to blow her nose.

Less than thirty minutes later, one hundred and sixty sheets of paper were collated, stapled, and stuffed into Bob's leather briefcase. He rushed past Sarah, still sitting at the secretary's desk, and muttered, "I'll miss my train. Bye, Honey." Bob's briefcase smacked against his legs as he scrambled out the door.

* * *

Sarah stood up again and brushed paint flecks from her jeans. That bastard, she thought, he never thanked me for anything. And before I left he had the nerve to say, "You've never done a thing for me in our whole marriage."

Stretching her arms high above her head Sarah realized if she didn't stop brooding, she would never get her homework finished. She ran her hands over the back of her jeans, moved down two steps and sat down again. She picked up her textbook from the step above, removed the bookmark and read: ". . . art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes her its instrument." Actually, the text used *him* not *her*, but Sarah automatically changed the pronoun. She'd begun that habit years before when she discovered that in referring to herself as an artist she wrote "he."

“ ... The artist is not a person endowed with a free will who seeks her own end, but one who allows art to realize its purpose through her.” Sarah couldn't remember the author's name, but she absolutely agreed with “him.”

Bending her head back to her book she read: “On the one hand, the common human longing for happiness, satisfaction and security in life; on the other, a ruthless passion for creation which may go so far as to override every personal desire.”

The same struggle raged on in Sarah: the longing for love and understanding clashed with her driving need to create. Chipping away another loose piece of flaking paint from the banister, she flipped it in the air. Bob had warned her when she was eighteen, “I'm calling off our marriage, I don't want you blaming me for not becoming the great American artist.”

“Oh Bob,” she'd replied without hesitation, “being an artist is not as important as being your wife. Please don't call off the wedding.”

Sarah scratched her head and wondered why a man could have a career and a wife, and a woman couldn't have a career and a husband. She wanted both, and for awhile, she'd had that combination with Bob. Maybe Bob had been gypped, too. He'd wanted a housewife and instead he'd married an artist.

Closing her textbook, Sarah laid it back on the step and lowered her head to her folded arms. She closed her eyes and felt crazy still fighting the same internal battle. She remembered a stranger approaching Bob as he sat with her at an art fair. “Mister,” he'd said, “your work has a lot of strength.”

“This is not my work. It's my wife's,” Bob had responded.

Sarah grinned remembering the look of surprise on the man's face. Later Bob said, “Sarah, if you were a man, your work would be recognized and rewarded.”

If she were a man? No way. She'd hate to be a man. Life wasn't easy for them either, but at least they were trained from childhood knowing they had to be

self-supporting adults. Sarah had been taught to knit, to sew, to bake. She'd learned how to pour tea and behave like a lady. A lot of good that did her now.

Looking upward at the white cotton puffs floating beside patches of blue, Sarah's negative attitude lifted. Solitude replaced loneliness, briefly. Filled with determination, she marched down the steps to her studio, resolving to make art her first priority.

Less than an hour later, shivering and cold to the bone, Sarah pounded up the steps to retrieve her textbook where she'd left it. Once inside her apartment, she flung the textbook on the makeshift couch and rushed to the phone. She dialed her lawyer's number and told him she was ready to file for divorce. Next she booked a flight to Chicago. Her last call was to the optometrist who employed her. "I won't be able to work next week, I have to fly to Chicago."

Ultimately she forced herself to finish her term paper and the next day, handed in her assignment. After class she approached the nun who taught it and said, "I'll be absent next week."

Before the end of November, Gloria drove Sarah to the airport, and before the day ended, she landed at Chicago's O'Hare airport.

CHAPTER 23

One week later, a teary-eyed Sarah kissed Johnny and little Carl farewell at the airport and flew back to California. She'd been granted temporary weekly alimony, which the judge had increased from \$140 to \$150. She'd gained the extra ten dollars Bob had refused to send her. She felt triumphant at this small victory and bragged to Jack when he picked her up at the L.A. airport. "That bastard will have to send my check on time from now on, the judge said so."

The judge had ordered on-time payments, but lawyer Bob ignored the judgment. After three weeks of late checks, Sarah called her lawyer to complain.

"The court did award you temporary alimony, Sarah, but no judge will hear your complaint about late payment. The money from Bob may arrive a week or two late, but the money does arrive."

Twisting the telephone cord in her hand, Sarah wished it were her lawyer's neck. Or Bob's. Or both. She slammed down the receiver, rocking the handset in its cradle, leaped from her chair and tripped over the waste basket. On her knees, she cursed men in general and her lawyer in particular. Lawyers and their lame excuses. They all talked double talk. That is, when you could reach one of them on the phone. Los Angeles lawyers talked California law; Chicago lawyers talked Illinois law. It was all the same everywhere — women didn't count.

Grabbing at the bits and pieces of debris littering the carpet, Sarah shoved crumpled note paper, empty cigarette packages, cigarette butts rimmed with lipstick, and used tissue back into the upright waste paper basket. She unwound herself from the floor, stood, and jammed her foot inside the basket and pushed the accumulation to the bottom. The scattered tobacco that remained on the carpet looked like ants attacking a Hershey bar.

Sarah splashed cold water on her face, had a cup of Earl Grey and, when she felt calm enough, she dialed Louise's number. Three rings later, she heard the voice she so desperately missed. "Lou, I have no business calling you. I can't afford it but God, I miss you. How's everything? Have you seen my grandchild lately? I bet he's grown a lot since I saw him last month."

"Everything's fine, Sarah. I miss you, too. Carl's a cute baby. I saw him last week when I went to your house, I mean Bob's. I mean . . . Sorry, Sarah."

"You can mention Bob's name. We both know he exists. Remember when we were young, Lou, and thought the things we read in books couldn't possibly be true? Later when my girlfriend Nat got divorced, remember how shocked we were? I couldn't be Nat's maid-of-honor when she married—I wasn't Catholic. Then, when I was Catholic, she divorced. Now I'm getting a divorce, and I don't know if I'm Catholic or not. Louise, I have to ask you something. You know how Bob has pushed me to file for divorce? What's his hurry? Does he have a girlfriend?"

"Please don't ask me things I can't answer."

"Sorry. How are the kids?"

Sarah hung up the phone feeling more lost and alone than ever. She and her "sister" Louise had always been honest with one another. Now she feared talk of divorce had come between them. She thought of a teen-aged Louise saying, "Sarah, you're my sister, and my friend." After the divorce, would they still be friends? Everything would be different after the divorce. Would Sarah look like a divorcee?

* * *

Sarah leaned against the doorjamb and looked at Bob lying in bed reading the Sunday paper with his underwear twisted around his thighs. "Bob, there's another divorcee at the door."

"Oh, hell," Bob mumbled, as he reached for his trousers. "If it's not the damn phone, it's something else. We get an unlisted number, and now those damn women

show up at the door.” Bob squeezed Sarah's ass as he brushed past her and rushed down the steps to the front door.

A half-hour later, Bob found Sarah in the kitchen. “How can you tell they're divorcees? You were right, again.”

“I don't know, let me think about it.” Sarah wiped the counter top between the kitchen and the dinette. “Well, all of them have bad bleaches with lots of dark roots around their faces. Their mouths are pinched tight. They all look angry, and ask for you through gritted teeth.”

Bob laughed as he pinched Sarah's arm and nibbled on her neck. “Your hair is bleached; aren't you lucky you have a good husband and don't have dark roots?” Bob gave Sarah a big hug, and they both laughed.

The next day Bob came home from the office groaning about his latest divorce case. “Dr. Hillary's getting a divorce. Can you believe it? After twenty-five years.” Hugging Sarah, he said, “We're so damn lucky; most people who get married as young as we did don't stay together. Divorce is such an ugly business. I hate divorce work. The men want to keep the money because they busted their balls earning it, and the women want to be supported in style forever after. Well, maybe a woman is entitled if she's been married twenty-five years or more; but most of the women coming into my office have only been married five or ten years. Let them go out and earn a living. Damn it, I can't change their husbands; I don't have a magic wand.”

* * *

It would take more than a magic wand to change Bob, Sarah thought, as she ground out another cigarette in the filled ash tray. She had been married over twenty-five years, and now Bob had changed his tune. He wanted the Pontiac, the car Sarah had paid for with her malpractice money. He even had the nerve to ask for half the money if she ever sold her apartment sculpture, even though Sarah had paid back every cent she'd borrowed from him to build it. Now he refused to pay the seven dollar monthly storage fee. She had to pay it out of one of her pitiful weekly checks. Weekly check! Right. The

judge had ordered Bob to pay Sarah for the five weeks he hadn't sent a check, and he still hadn't coughed up that money. And he never would. He'd also refused to pay back the two thousand dollars Sarah had lent him to pay his income tax.

Sarah's lawyer called her a fool when she told him she'd paid her own hospital and doctor bills after her last operation. "Those bills are the husband's responsibility," he'd said. "You play fair, but that doesn't mean Bob's going to. He'll demand everything. But don't worry, he's just playing the lawyer game. We'll ask for more than we expect, too."

The next morning Sarah couldn't force herself out of bed. Filled with despair, she was unwilling to face the day, unwilling to face the divorce that was now a date on the calendar. In the silence of her apartment, she curled up in bed and remembered Bob's morning noises: the electric toothbrush, spit hitting the sink, and smacks as he splashed skin bracer on his clean-shaven cheeks. She remembered listening to the toilet flush, knowing Bob would soon be standing over the bed.

* * *

Bob stood next to the bed and asked, "Aren't you getting up, Sarah? You look awful. Why can't I make you happy? You're always depressed. I like you better with a smile on your face."

"Why don't you give me something to smile about?" Sarah responded before she rolled over, turning her back on the disgust she'd seen in Bob's eyes. Bob slammed the bedroom door behind him as he left without kissing Sarah good-bye.

Sarah sat up in bed after she heard Bob slam out the front door. Reaching for her first cigarette of the day, she flipped on the radio, and listened to Carole King croon "It's too late, baby, now it's too late. . . Stayed in bed all morning just to pass the time. . . There's something wrong here there can be no denying . . ."

* * *

Living with Bob that last year, Sarah had stayed in bed every morning and avoided responsibilities. Now in San Pedro, her Vanderville behavior returned. She'd reach for another cigarette before she washed her face or brushed her teeth. She'd stay in

bed or pattered around the apartment in her pajamas until after lunch when she dressed for work. The only time she set the alarm clock was when she had a morning class. She avoided her studio, and did her homework reluctantly, if at all.

When Sarah could no longer fake happiness, she'd left Bob. Now she was alone and still miserable and Bob wasn't around to blame. She had to face the fact that her miseries were her own. She'd known how to make Bob happy—give, give, give.

* * *

Bob's image appeared in the mirror in front of Sarah as she sat at the bathroom vanity. “God damn it, Sarah, I've asked you to look for my keys and here you are putting on your make-up.” Bob's voice sounded like he had a razor in his throat. Sarah wanted to growl back, “Find your own damn keys!” Instead she answered in a monotone, “Bob, stop screaming. You sound like your mother.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Turn around from that damn mirror and talk to me.”

Sarah gripped the sides of the counter, and stared into Bob's mirrored face. “You're so damn afraid you'll end up like your father, buckling under a woman's demands. Your mother is a controller, and she bullies your father—the sweetest man I've ever known. She screams and nags at him constantly. You're so afraid you'll end up like him that you constantly bully and scream at me, and I'm nothing like your mother. As a matter of fact, when I hear you shout and curse, I think I'm listening to my father.”

“Your head is definitely screwed on backwards. You're as crazy as your mother.” Bob's lips curled in a snarl, and his eyes narrowed in anger. His hostility filled the small bathroom. Sarah stood and turned toward Bob, and looked up into Bob's eyes. Their bodies only inches apart, the distance between them impenetrable.

“Damn it, listen to me, Bob. Whenever your father and mother are here, and that's practically all the time, you scream at me from the time they arrive until the time they leave. Are you trying to prove to your father that you're your own man? You are, you know. And I am not a nag and a bully like your mother.”

“For crissakesake. I didn't have a rotten childhood like yours. My mother and father loved us. It's you. You're getting more like your mother every day. The same insatiable desire for love. I give you love and you push me away, just like you're doing now.”

“Bob, pleeease.” Sarah's voice broke as she shoved past Bob and he rushed after her. Before she could reach the double bed in the adjoining room, Bob caught her and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed her forehead and murmured, “Okay, Sarah, okay. I'll see if I can hold my temper down, at least when my parents are around,” he chuckled.

Sarah's eyes closed and she buried her head in Bob's shirt. His sardonic grin went unobserved. She snuggled into him, then pulled away and stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “Thanks, Honey,” she said. “I'll try, too. When you raise your voice and make demands, I feel frightened.”

“C'mon, don't make mountains out of molehills. I've told you time and time again, our marriage was made in heaven. I love you, Honey.”

“Sometimes I think I'd die without your love.”

“You shouldn't say things like that,” Bob said, crushing her against him. “But I love it! Now come and help me find my keys.”

* * *

Sarah snubbed out another cigarette, wondering who looked for Bob's keys now.

Walking a half-dozen steps to her bedroom, Sarah threw herself, fully dressed, across the bed and had a good cry. Then she sat up and reached for her latest journal. She opened it at random and under, COMPLIMENTS she read: “You have young eyes. You have confidence and breeding. Your refinement, your culture, are qualities that just don't fit with your blue jeans. I thought you were a Beverly Hills matron playing Bohemian when I first met you.” Well, maybe she had young eyes, but the rest of her body was sure going to hell. She twisted the joy out of that compliment and remembered Bob's words, “You never remember a compliment.” (That's why she now wrote them

down.) “And you never forget an insult.” Bob was sure right about that. She'd gotten into the habit of reading her compliment list when she needed a lift. And she laughed now as she read: “You're only separated ten months? That's funny; you don't look shattered.” Another entry read: “You could live in a storefront and make it into a home with your magic. You could make a home out of a cardboard box.” The last compliment on the list read: “When someone does work they enjoy, their eyes sparkle like yours.”

Sarah appreciated the kindness of her friends, but she doubted that they knew her at all, or they would realize she had no confidence. Lacking self-esteem, Sarah didn't believe she was pretty, no matter who said it. When she looked in the mirror, all she saw was a pimple or a new frown line between her eyes.

Undressing for bed, Sarah impulsively stood nude before the full-length mirror. She twisted this way and that, looking at her nakedness from all angles. After brushing her teeth and donning her pajamas, she dialed Gloria's number. Most evenings the two joked away their miseries, reciting the small happenings of their lives.

“Hi, Glo, it's me. Wait till I tell you what happened. This morning, my bully landlord arrived at 10:00 A.M. I watched him from the steps as he carried all that rotted lumber from around my car—yes, I finally parked my car halfway down the drive. I know Bill saw me, but he was too chicken to say hello. Remember that garage he promised me? He had to move stacks of lumber in front of it before he could even open the door. It was too beautiful, watching that bastard struggle down the driveway as I've had to for months. I laughed my head off. It felt so good not being on the shitty end of the stick.” As Sarah hung up the phone, memories of Bart filled her head.

* * *

Bart pushed his dinner plate away. “Good dinner, El,” he complimented. He placed his hands on the table, pushed back on his chair, and reached into his shirt pocket for a cigar. He rolled the stogie between his fingers, and sighed, “This is one fine Cuban cigar. It ought to be, it cost enough.” Bart held the cigar under his nose and sniffed. The cigar stunk before it was lit, and smelled even worse afterward.

Bart waved his smoke at his teen-age daughter, and Sarah pushed back her chair from the table and faced him. “Now Sarah,” he began, “when I was a boy, I was always the shortest, of course, but I ran with the big boys—and I could piss farther than any one of them.” Bart waved his cigar more than the width of the table to demonstrate his achievement. “One Halloween we were out after dark and the big boys were running way ahead of me. My legs were so short it was hard for me to keep up, so I didn't see those big stinkers push over the outhouse.”

Bart paused, flicked his cigar ash, and asked, “You know what an outhouse is, Baby?” Father and daughter giggled. Tapping his water glass with his knife, Bart sang, “Sam, Sam the shit house man.” While he beat out the rhythm, tapped his dinner plate, Sarah's water glass and plate, he sang, “Flip, flop, hear the turds drop, that's Sam, the shit house man.”

“Bart, stop that,” El scolded, choking on her laughter.

Bart pressed his finger and thumb to his nose and said, “Pee-you,” waved his arm at his wife and continued. “Those boys pushed over the outhouse, and in the dark—it was very dark—I fell in! Up to my nose in shit. Screaming and shouting, waving my hands over my head, I whooped and hollered, 'HELP, HELP' at the top of my lungs. My friends came running back and when they saw me they held their noses and couldn't stop laughing. Finally, Freddy took pity on me and handed me the end of a stick. I grabbed hold of that branch like my life depended on it, and the guys, choking on their laughter, pulled me out. When my shitty shoes hit the ground, I ran home like a bat out of hell. My stink reached the top of the steps that lead to our apartment before I did!

“I smelled soooo bad, I couldn't even stand it! My mother opened the door, took one look at me and started screaming. She forced me to take off all my clothes right there in the hall and, stark naked, I ran back down the stairs and buried my clothes and shoes in the back yard!”

It wasn't so much what Bart said, but the way he enhanced the spoken word with his gestures and timing; that's what brought the house down.

Still in an “up” mood, Bart turned his attention to his wife. “El, is the chicken bone dry yet?” he asked.

Elizabeth rose from her chair and returned with the dried wishbone and laid it on the white tablecloth in front of Bart.

“Okay, Baby, make a wish,” Bart said, as he held up the chicken bone shaped like a “V.” Sarah closed her eyes and silently wished that her father would stay in a good mood.

“What did you wish, Sarah?”

“It's a secret, Daddy; you told me never to tell a secret.”

Bart laughed. “I'm glad you're paying attention to the things I'm teaching you. They'll come in handy someday.” He extended one end of the “V” to Sarah, “Are you ready?” he asked.

Bart held his end of the wishbone firm and steady, while Sarah played fair and yanked. The brittle bone snapped, leaving her with the short end.

“Too bad, Baby,” Bart chuckled, “you lost again.”

* * *

Laughing to herself, Sarah turned off the bedside light and snuggled under the covers. Rolling over on her side, ready for sleep, an insight jarred her awake. Had both her father and her husband treated her like a toy for their amusement?

CHAPTER 24

Bart had always “toyed” with his daughter’s affection. His wants and needs were his first priority.

* * *

Ten-year-old Sarah’s bedtime was promptly at 8:00 P.M., therefore she was sound asleep when Bart came home from work before midnight and wanted to meet his brothers and sisters in Chinatown.

Elizabeth nudged Sarah awake and said, “Hurry. Dress quick. Daddy wants to take us to Chinatown.”

Dressed, her hair barely combed, Sarah huddled in the back seat of the Hudson, hugging her pillow and blanket, while Bart drove like “a bat out of hell” to Chicago. By 1:00 A.M. Aunt Mae, Uncle Ed, Aunt Adele, Elizabeth, and Sarah were sharing a big round table upstairs at Cam Lan. Sarah was the only child in attendance. She stared at the brown stains on the white tablecloth, or played with her wooden chopsticks, while the adults around her swore, told off-color stories, and laughed their heads off. The next day, if Sarah repeated any of the words she’d heard, Elizabeth washed her mouth out with soap.

The restaurant emptied, the waiters yawned, but the Mindel family party didn’t break up until three or four in the morning. Sarah fell asleep in the back seat on the long drive back to Calumet City, and Bart carried her into the house when they finally arrived home.

In the morning Elizabeth had Sarah excused from school with one phone call. “She’s ill and can’t come to school today.” Sarah had a holiday and listened to radio soap operas all afternoon.

* * *

On Christmas Eve Bob called Sarah in the middle of the night. Half asleep, she croaked into the phone, “Bob, is that you?”

“Yup, it’s me. I owed you one. Remember, you called and woke me up in the middle of the night,” Bob said and hiccuped into the phone.

“Bob, just what time is it?”

“Three A.M. here. Merry Christmas.” Bob hiccuped again, and Sarah asked, “Have you been drinking?”

“Don’t start!”

“It’s 1:00 A.M. here, why are you calling me? You know it’s hard on me to hear your voice. It takes me days after one of your phone calls to get back to normal.” Sarah had confided her feelings to Bob since she was seventeen and didn’t know enough to stop.

“Everything’s fine, juss wanted to hear your voice. The family showed old home movies tonight and you looked so beautiful and I . . .”

“What are you saying?”

“Wait, Sarah, don’t misunderstand. I don’t love you anymore, but I miss you. I like you and I want us to be friends after our divorce.”

“You’re out of your mind. Friends trust each other and I sure as hell don’t trust you. It’s just the reverse with me. I love you, but I don’t like you.”

Bob belched into the phone, then spoke in a honeyed tone, “Don’t get angry, sweetheart. It’s Christmas and I miss you.”

Sarah swallowed hard to keep back tears. Unable to stop the flow of emotion, she whimpered into the phone.

“Sarah, are you all right?”

“No, damn it! I am not all right. We’ll be getting a divorce in January. When you need information call my lawyer, not me.”

“You’re right. You’re right. But wait, please don’t hang up. I need to talk to you,” Bob said, suddenly sober and sincere.

They talked for two hours, both realizing that this would be their last honest conversation. Sarah and Bob began divorcing that night, the formalities took longer.

A month later, Sarah awakened feeling disoriented, remnants of a disquieting dream lingering as she glanced around the room at the regulation dresser and the paint-by-number painting on the wall. Another Holiday Inn, all the interiors interchangeable.

Rolling to the bedside table, Sarah plucked up her watch and thought, thank God, it's only seven. She wasn't due in court until 10:00 A.M. She toyed with her watch, turned it over, and read the inscription on the back. "To Sarah with undying love. June 10, 1948."

The watch was almost twenty-seven years old; a gift from Bob on their wedding day. Undying love! Sarah hadn't worn the watch since she'd left Bob, and now she knew why. She was tired of carrying it around in her purse when she had to keep track of time. This afternoon, after the divorce, she'd celebrate by buying a new watch. It was definitely time to get rid of that old thing. She was Bob's old thing, and he was getting rid of her. Sarah wished she could erase all the memories—the love, the hate, the good times, and the bad, as easily as "Mrs." was about to be removed from her signature.

Dawdling over her morning rituals, Sarah brushed her teeth in slow motion, aware of her teeth, her mouth, the spit in the sink; aware that once she dressed and headed for the courthouse, her days as a married woman were over.

A witness to her own confusion, Sarah stood shivering at the motel window, mesmerized by the swirling snowflakes drifting down beyond her vision as she stared at the frozen shoreline of Lake Michigan. She lingered at the window and hugged herself for warmth, unwilling to face the finality of divorce. She grabbed a sweater from her unpacked suitcase, wrapped it around her shoulders and sat huddled in a chair. She stared out the window as a shudder of disgust rattled her body. She hated this day. Love was supposed to last forever.

Lighting a cigarette, she inhaled deeply and watched the exhaled smoke circle above her head and disappear in a flash of sunlight. What if she disappeared and didn't show up in court? Despite herself she still loved the bastard. How could she love a guy who treated her like dirt? If she had any self-respect, she'd rejoice at her freedom. Freedom! Then she remembered her dream.

She and Bob were submerged in water. Bob held one end of a safety-net and Sarah held the other. Bob's eyes lingered on her, then he dropped his end of the net and disappeared. Sarah clung to her end and sank deeper and deeper into the murky water. Unable to breath she finally dropped her burden, and the safety-net disappeared. She fully expected to sink to the bottom and die; instead, her body rose and she "crawled" up and stroked through the water with power and strength. She broke through the surface, breathed deeply and felt exhilarated and free.

Sarah had no safety-net as she stood in the hall outside the courtroom and watched Bob stride toward her. He wore a new beige vicuna double-breasted top coat, and held a matching beige hat in his hand. The decorative red feather in the hat-band added a touch of color to his ensemble.

Rushing down the hall to Sarah, Bob wrapped her in a bear hug, kissed her tenderly on the cheek, and Sarah responded on cue with a pounding heart. Her lawyer, the one she'd hired without knowing he'd been one of Bob's law school professors, watched the soon-to-be-divorced couple embrace, a look of incredulity on his face.

Bob and Sarah sat side by side on a hall bench and held hands while they waited for their case to be called. A badly bleached blonde woman burst out of the courtroom door, howling like a banshee, "You rotten sons of bitches! I won't settle!" Sarah's nose wrinkled in distaste at this display of bad manners. Bob leaned toward her and whispered, "Isn't she disgusting?" He squeezed Sarah's hand and, side by side, the litigants sat and waited for their case to be called, like people in a hospital waiting for the doctor to assure them that their next of kin had survived surgery. Only this time the judge was the surgeon and the marriage was dead. Sarah, still enmeshed with Bob, felt

his pain as if it were an extension of her own. She felt possessive, tied to Bob in a Gordian knot that could not be severed by words spoken by a black-robed stranger.

“You look well, Sarah. Isn’t that the suede skirt I bought you?” Bob asked.

“Yes, I couldn’t afford a new outfit, but I see you’re still buying new clothes.”

Ignoring Sarah’s dig, Bob asked, “Are you working yet?”

“Yes.”

“Doing what?”

“I met an optometrist when I had my glass frames repaired and after we talked for a while, the doctor offered me a part-time job.”

“What do you do?”

“This and that. Leonard’s a good teacher. I fit and adjust eyeglass frames. I handle the front office, keep the whole place clean, deposit the daily receipts at the bank, type his letters, all the things I did for you when I worked in your office. The only difference is that he pays me.”

Before Bob had time to respond, the court clerk called, “Shallot vs. Shallot,” and the divorce was on. Bob dropped Sarah’s hand like a hot coal and charged into the courtroom with ease. Sarah’s lawyer accompanied her down the aisle and whispered, “When the judge asks you if you want any money after your death, just answer no.”

“I don’t understand,” Sarah whispered back.

“Never mind, just do as I say. Say no.”

Sarah’s only experience in a courtroom was watching Bob’s performance, now the judge greeted Bob and said, “I haven’t seen you for quite a while, Mr. Shallot.” Was Bob the defendant or her lawyer?

Sarah, called to the witness stand, raised her right hand and swore on the Bible to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Truth be told, she just wanted to race right back down that aisle and scream her head off. Instead, she sat primly in the witness box, her legs crossed at the ankles and her hands folded in her lap. Center-stage like an actress, Sarah responded to her lawyer’s questions. Her tears keeping pace with

each answer as she struggled with every reply. Twice her lawyer asked, “Do you understand, Mrs. Shallot, that you will not receive any money after you die?” and twice Sarah answered, “Yes.”

The third time her lawyer and then the judge repeated the question, Sarah giggled nervously and replied, “I want it. I want the money after I’m dead,” and grinned.

The court reporter snickered, the courtroom spectators tittered, and the judge, on the verge of apoplexy, beat his gavel and bellowed, “Mrs. Shallot, you are not taking these proceedings seriously,” and in a deep authoritarian voice pronounced, “I strongly suggest that you do.” The judge glared down at Sarah, seated beneath him, while her lawyer stared at her with a flabbergasted look on his face. Sarah’s feeble attempt at humor had backfired and she felt as lost and alone as she had as a child. She’d had no one to protect her then, or now.

Bob winked at Sarah and her tears flowed, smudging her mascara and smearing her lipstick as they dripped silently to the wilted collar of her faded silk blouse. The judge reprimanded her once more, and she wondered why, after spending hours in her lawyer’s office, he had waited until they walked into the courtroom to advise her to say “no” when asked if she wanted money after she died. What a ridiculous question. Who cared about money when you were dead. Later, Sarah learned that her “no” revoked her right to return to court for alimony. Now Sarah’s lawyer handed the judge a five page notarized report from her doctor testifying to the precarious state of her health. The judge gave the report a cursory look and said in disgust, “If she wants a divorce, let her get a job. Women want their freedom, let them go to work.” Feminism has backfired, too, Sarah thought. In the old days the betrayed wife received abundant alimony. Now, after twenty-six years as a housewife, she was told to get a job and support herself.

The divorce was now official, but the marital bond remained intact as Bob insisted they lunch together. Sarah felt too weak to protest. At the Blackhawk Restaurant Bob held Sarah’s chair like a gentleman as she seated herself, and he ordered lunch for them both. Waiting to be served, Bob held Sarah’s hand across the table,

dropping it when the food arrived. The Caesar salad lay untouched on Sarah's plate, the fork still resting on the table, while Bob stuffed his mouth. He did take the time to push his fork prongs near Sarah's plate and ask, "Why aren't you eating? You've got to eat."

"Why?"

Tears still dripped down Sarah's cheeks and smeared her makeup as she blew her nose. "Bob, I know you're going to get married. Today and the day you remarry will be the hardest days of my life. I want you to tell me who she is—who are you marrying? I want to do all my suffering in one day and then put it behind me."

Bob helped himself to the anchovies that trimmed Sarah's salad and said with a grin, "What makes you think I'm getting married?"

Sarah sniffled and said, "I just feel it. I promise not to say a word against her. Please just tell me. Who are you marrying?"

Bob dabbed at Sarah's eyes with his napkin and said, "You could never stand it, don't insist."

Tears streamed down Sarah's cheeks in a rivulet of pain as she countered, "I'll be the judge of that. Just tell me. I know you're marrying someone. It can't be the one you had the affair with. She's too stupid."

"Okay, you asked for it. Before you say any more about Lorraine, you need to know. I *am* marrying her."

For the first time since Sarah had left the courthouse, she stopped crying. She looked like some sick clown as she guffawed and roared with laughter—part hysteria, part sheer humor at the idiocy of it all.

"Damn it, Sarah. Why are you laughing? You're making a fool of yourself."

"I promised I wouldn't say a word," Sarah snickered, then she convulsed once more with laughter.

"Jesus Christ! Stop laughing and tell me."

“Okay, now *you’ve* asked for it.” Mirth softened Sarah’s serious answer. “In about four years when the sex part is over, you’re going to turn to my side of the bed and ask yourself, ‘What the hell have I done?’”

“Is that what you wish for me?”

“No, that’s just the way I see it.”

Bob didn’t want Sarah anymore, but he hated the thought that she didn’t want him. Sarah didn’t want Bob anymore, but she hated the thought that he didn’t want her.

At the restaurant exit, Bob pointed to an empty chair and said, “Sit here and wait for me. I have to make a call.” Sarah sat.

In a loud voice, Bob bragged into the pay-phone, “And . . . yeah . . . that’s right. I don’t have to pay her college tuition, and nothing from the business . . . I was smart enough not to pay her a dollar a year, or . . . Right, no alimony . . . she has to pay her own taxes on the lump sum and I don’t have to pay the lump all at once. She has to pay her own legal fees. Yeah. Sure, great. What do . . .?”

Sarah bounced from her chair as if she were sitting on a lit match. She snarled into the open phone booth and shouted, “GOOD-BYE! I’M LEAVING!”

“Wait!” Bob yelled as Sarah huffed toward the exit. “WAIT!” he demanded, as he snapped into the phone. “Gotta go. Bye, Dan.”

Bob caught up with Sarah before she reached the exit and pulled her toward him. She strained away from him and spat through gritted teeth, “How could you? I could hear every word you said. I’m not even out of your sight and you’re bragging to Dan about the screwing you gave me. Get away from me.”

“I’m a lawyer. It has nothing to do with the way I feel about you. I just reported the case like a good lawyer, proud to win.” He drew Sarah to him and squeezed her in a hug. “C’mon, Honey,” he said, “this is our last time together. Don’t ruin it.”

Sarah, still a victim of the tie that binds, whimpered, “You could have waited until I was out of ear shot,” and then allowed Bob to open the exit door for her. Outside on the sidewalk, Bob dropped Sarah’s arm and hailed a cab. The cab idled while Bob

wrapped his arms around his “ex” and kissed her passionately on the lips with ardor, like a lover meeting his girl after a long absence. Then he climbed into the back seat of the taxi and waved to Sarah standing alone on the sidewalk. She watched Bob wave until the cab disappeared into the traffic. Exhausted, emotionally and physically, the lines on Sarah’s face formed a crocheted pattern of grief. She leaned back against a brick building, unable to move.

An hour later Sarah was surprised to find herself sitting in a coffee shop on Adams Street. She sat at the counter and looked at dribbles of spilled liquid that had formed miniature rivers across the counter while the waitress ignored her and stared straight ahead. Sarah’s eyes were swollen half shut from hours of relentless tears. She felt as if she were under water, as she watched a rag, moving in slow motion, mop the wet counter. The sounds she heard were muffled as a spoon hit a glass and a cup smacked a saucer.

Somehow, another hour passed and Sarah found herself exiting a bus she didn’t remember boarding. She walked down Ontario Street from Michigan Avenue to Lake Shore Drive, turned left and moved along the sidewalk, parallel to Lake Michigan’s frozen shore. Her tears unwiped, she sobbed hysterically and let out a long, shrill, agonized scream of despair. The rumble of flowing traffic, and six inches of shoveled snow on the banks, muffled the sound.

A driver honked and waved from his car. Sarah was considering suicide and some asshole wanted to flirt. Damn him. Damn Bob. Damn men. Sarah blew her nose and her tears stopped as she thought, “With my luck, I wouldn’t drown in Lake Michigan, I’d just break my leg on the God damn ice.”

Removing her leather glove from her left hand, Sarah twisted her gold wedding band with her thumb; back and forth, back and forth, while she repeated, “I’m divorced. I’m divorced. I’m divorced,” and fresh tears cascaded down her cheeks. She felt their warmth as she removed her wedding ring and jammed it into her purse, then walked back to the street, and hailed a passing cab.

In her motel room, at three in the afternoon, Sarah undressed and climbed into bed. She pulled the sheet up to her chin, stared at the ceiling and cried without making a sound. At five the telephone rang. She dabbed at her swollen eyes, coughed, and swallowed phlegm as she reached for the receiver. She raised the phone to her mouth and tentatively said, "Hello."

"Sarah, it's me, Bob."

"Huh? Why are you calling me? Damn you. Leave me alone. How did you find out where I'm staying?"

"Louise told me. There's something I need to know. Why did you laugh when I told you I planned to marry Lorraine?"

Once again Sarah's laughter was uncontrolled; laughter oozing around each word she uttered. "I promised you, Bob," she giggled, "I wouldn't say one word against the woman you planned to marry." Sarah wiped laughter tears from her eyes and recognized the absurdity of this roller-coaster day filled with her screams and laughter.

"Damn it, stop laughing." Bob's voice rose. "Do you know something about Lorraine that I don't?"

"Okay, you asked for it. I'll admit Lorraine has a good sense of humor, and a knock-out figure—boobs that don't stop—but she's a bigot. She has no class. As much as we've argued, I've never humiliated you in public. I watched her take away her husband's charge plates. By the way, is Lorraine still married?"

"Her husband is a stupid ass."

Sarah stifled another laugh, "Maybe he's not so dumb after all, he saw through her. She's not a lady, she's a bimbo; the kind of woman who raises her skirt to blot lipstick on her slip. She's . . ."

"She's the woman I'm going to marry. And I love her."

A half-hour later, Louise called to reassure Sarah that they would always be sisters. "The divorce doesn't cancel that."

"How did this happen, Lou? I still don't understand."

“When Bob felt good about himself, he could afford to let you do your own thing. He hasn’t felt good about himself since Dad died, and his mid-life crisis began. He put you down so he could feel good about himself. He’s my brother, and I love him, but I love you, too. This is breaking my heart.”

The “sisters” were in tears before they hung up. Sarah slipped out of bed to splash cold water on her face and prepare a cold, wet washcloth. She needed a best friend today, and Louise couldn’t be with her because she was Bob’s sister.

At 6:30 A.M. Sarah awoke filled with laughter as she remembered her dream: grabbing at one of Lorraine’s full breasts, she’d pinched it with all her strength. Then she’d turned to Bob and said, “You’ll be sorry.”

“You’re probably right,” Bob’s dream voice answered, “But *she’s* domestic.”

The laughter was a momentary diversion before sadness engulfed her again. The divorce was reality, not a dream. Life was strange. Sarah, like Lillith in the Kabbalist legend, had argued that women were equal, and Bob, like Adam, had found a more submissive Eve. Sarah was too independent now to be a submissive wife, but not independent enough to value her new options. God must have a sense of humor. Sarah was in love with a black man who refused to sleep with her, and Bob would marry a bigot so he could sleep with her full-time.

For an hour and a half, Sarah lay in bed, replaying the last twenty-four hours. By 8:30 she had showered and applied her makeup with painstaking care, but it didn’t mask the pain in her eyes, which were crusted and almost swollen shut from shedding so many tears. Hiding behind sunglasses on a snowy January day in Chicago, Sarah trudged from art gallery to art gallery, dragging her portfolio, hoping to arrange a show before she returned to California the following day. But all the gallery dealers said, “We like your work, unfortunately our stable is full.” What did that make Sarah? A horse’s ass? Disappointed, she headed down Ontario Street to the Lake Shore Drive Holiday Inn. On her walk she passed the new Museum of Contemporary Art. On impulse, she decided to enter. What the hell, she thought, she’d already lost everything, including her pride.

Inside the museum Sarah, still wearing sunglasses, talked her way into the administration offices and asked to speak to the director. A woman passing by the secretary's desk paused and asked, "Why are you wearing sunglasses in January, and inside the museum? Are you a movie star or something?"

Sarah grinned. "No, I'm no movie star. I'm covering my eyes from yesterday's divorce."

"You were divorced yesterday! And you're showing your work today! You've got guts. I couldn't leave the house for a month after my divorce. I'm the assistant director. I like your style. Come into my office and show me your work."

Forty-five minutes later, Sarah was back on the sidewalk having promised to contribute one of her major constructions to a museum auction planned for the spring.

Twenty-four hours later, on the flight from Chicago, Sarah sat buckled in her seat and held her sketch book in her hand. She wrote, rather than sketched, for almost the entire flight, and her pen sped across the blank pages. When the stewardess served dinner, somewhere over the Rockies, the man sitting next to Sarah asked, "Are you a writer?"

"No, I'm an artist," Sarah said without a smile. After dinner, she reopened her sketch book and continued pouring out her soul on paper until the pilot announced, "We will be landing at the Los Angeles Airport in ten minutes. Please fasten your seat belts. I hope you had an enjoyable trip."

Sarah walked along the enclosed ramp from the plane and a smile surfaced as she spotted Jack waiting at the gate to greet the "divorced woman." She looked up at him, with his movie star grin, his white teeth flashing hello and welcome, as he bent to buzz her on the cheek. The sadness in her heart lifted briefly. Jocko grabbed for Sarah's carry-on bag, and he ushered her down the moving stairs before he asked, "How'd it go?"

"Don't ask."

While waiting for the luggage to bump down the ramp, Jocko wrapped an arm around Sarah's shoulder and asked, "Do you want to stop at my place for a drink before I drive you home?"

Sarah smiled up at him and said, "Yes."

CHAPTER 25

Jack carried Sarah's luggage out to the sidewalk. "Stay put," he said, "I'll get the van." Fifteen minutes later the luggage was tucked safely inside the van and the odd couple tooled along the freeway, heading for the Hollywood hills. Jack kept his eyes on the road while he once again asked Sarah about her week in Chicago.

"Well, Jack, as Sophie Tucker once said, 'I've been rich and I've been poor. Rich is better.' Bob really screwed me. My settlement stinks. If I were ever dumb enough to marry again, and if I got another divorce, I'd hire Bob for my attorney. He was a lousy husband, but he's a first-rate lawyer — the judge gave *him* everything he asked for. Now I'm poorer than poor."

"Tell me about poor, Sarah!" Jack laughed. "Blacks are authorities on poverty. When I was growing up on the south side of Chicago, I vowed one day I'd live in the sunshine and now I do. I changed my life when I was twenty-five. Eleven years of California and I'd never go back. I won't even go back to visit my mother. She doesn't live in the ghetto anymore; I send her money every month, but if she wants to see me she has to come out here."

Sarah slumped wearily in the right front seat. Why did Jack have to remind her that he was only thirty-six when last month she'd turned forty-five? No wonder he'd lost sexual interest; Sarah was too old for him. But last summer, age had been no problem. When Jack stopped the physical intimacy he'd said, "Sarah, you need a caring friend more than you need a lover." He was wrong, Sarah needed both. Turning her head to look at Jack, Sarah did appreciate that she hadn't lost his friendship. He was a wonderful friend: lighting her water heater, plunging her toilet, spraying for roaches, and lugging heavy art work.

“Hey, Sarah, you’re actually sitting still and not talking. Are you watching the red lights turn green? Where’s your mind?”

“I was just appreciating you and our friendship. You’ve taught me how to live as a single person. I don’t know how I would have survived the last year without you. Thanks for everything, including picking me up tonight.” Sarah leaned across the front seat and gave Jack a peck on the cheek.

Jack took his hand off the steering wheel long enough to squeeze Sarah’s and say, “No sweat.”

Sarah brightened and sat up straight. She knew Jack loved her, even if he wouldn’t admit it. Why didn’t he just park the damn van by the side of the road, take her in his arms, and smother her with kisses. That’s what she needed, to be smothered in love. Bob had smothered her, but not with love.

“Bob’s a prick!”

“Where did that come from?”

“Bob screwed me in every way for twenty-six years. Now he’s screwed me in the divorce.”

“Screw is a very hostile word to use for love making.”

“So is ‘jump her bones,’ so what? There are no comparable phrases for women to use. Well, maybe ‘he’s a stud.’ But that’s not hostile.”

“A man has a mistress. A woman, a gigolo. What’s the difference in that? The one who pays is a different gender, that’s all.”

“Well, I’ll never have to worry about someone going to bed with me for my money,” Sarah laughed.

“Why don’t you give yourself a little credit, Sarah. You have a great sense of humor. You don’t have to tell stories, like your father, for a laugh. You have wit. You were born with a funny bone. You’re a very complex woman, but you have more intellectual prowess than any woman I’ve ever met.”

Sarah touched Jack's hand gently and said, "I really appreciate you. I really do. You put my apartment back together every time you come for dinner. Then you put me back together. You listen to me whine and complain about Bob, my apartment, my financial future, my life. Why do you put up with me?"

"I helped you, because you seemed so vulnerable and fragile. I was afraid you'd break without a helping hand. But you're getting stronger all the time and now I help you because you're my friend. I've been divorced for seven years and I know what you're going through. One of these days I'll have taught you enough so that you'll be street-wise and know how to take care of yourself."

"Does street-wise happen by osmosis from living in a slum?"

"No, it comes from surviving enough bad stuff — and you're well on your way. Being single is more than knowing how to light your own water heater. I mean, living as a single person is different than living as an unmarried one. There's a definite distinction between acting single and acting unmarried. You've got the guts, Sarah, it's just your packaging that needs work."

"I'm a mess, Jack. I know that. But you've never mentioned your wife, or what kind of marriage you had. In fact, I don't even know how long you were married."

"I was married for five years to this petite blonde, beautiful, intelligent, witty woman. I loved her more than I can express. I came home early from work one day and found her in *our* bed with my cousin, Ron. He was only a few years older than I am now. He's so tall, dark, and handsome, he went into the army as an Italian, not a black." Jack chuckled, but in the street light Sarah could see the pain in his face.

"How did you handle that?" she asked.

"I went down to Grant Park, by then blacks could use that beautiful park and a white wouldn't step foot on the grass."

Jack sighed and Sarah held her tongue. He finally continued. "I jumped into the water in my shorts and swam out so far that I knew I'd either sink or swim. I decided I wanted to live and so I swam like hell back to shore. When I returned to our apartment,

Lisa had cleared out, and I've never seen her since. We never got a divorce, but if I wanted one, I could sue for desertion."

"Still being married keeps you safe, doesn't it?"

"You got me that time. Sure, I never want to repeat that kind of mistake, and until I know I can really trust again, I might as well forget the legal shit."

Jack eased the van into his reserved parking space and carried Sarah's luggage up the front steps. In the condo he left her luggage near the front door and hung her jacket in the front closet.

"Jack, why did you lug up my suitcases? I'll only be here for an hour or so, it's getting late."

"Baby, this neighborhood looks respectable, but trust me, nothing is safe left in a car around here."

Sarah slipped off her high heeled pumps, padded across the carpet and followed Jack into the kitchen. He opened the fridge door, peered in, and asked, "Are you hungry?"

For love, Sarah thought, but said, "Not particularly, you know the stewardesses — that wasn't meant as a dig — they feed you continually so you won't worry about dropping out of the sky."

"Well, drop in a chair and I'll pour us some brandy." Jack busied himself laying out crackers and cheese and poured two snifters. Then he sat down across from Sarah at the kitchen table and leaned over to remove his shoes.

Sarah sat quietly staring into Jack's eyes until finally he asked her what she was thinking.

"Nothing."

"Well, I'll tell you what I've been thinking. After we stopped being lovers, you complained about my bringing my dates over to meet you. Especially the stewardesses," he said with a wink. "Well, the truth is, I have so much regard for you I want your approval. I've put you on a pedestal."

Sarah grinned. “Well, now that’s something. I’ve put you on a pedestal, too; that makes us equal.”

Without waiting for a reply, Sarah crossed the kitchen and bent over to pick up the purse she’d dropped when she entered the room. She rummaged for her cigarettes and when she turned back to Jack he whistled softly and said, “You really do have a sweet ass, Baby.”

“Hey, Jack, if you don’t want my peaches, don’t shake my tree,” she said, softening her words with a smile.

“Who says I don’t want your peaches?” Jack replied, as he stood and moved closer to her. He handed her the joint he’d been smoking and she took a deep drag. Then she finished the brandy he’d handed her, still standing, unable to move from the spot. Exhaustion had finally hit and she stood like a zombie, not talking or moving.

Jack picked up Sarah in his powerful arms, carried her into the bedroom and gently laid her on the bed. He undressed her with tenderness, and his eyes traced the soft curve of her breast, her slender waist and rounded hips. Looking at Sarah, Jack thought she truly was a beautiful woman, both inside and outside.

Jack had stopped making love to Sarah because he was wise enough to know he was not commitment material. Then. Not because he found her sexually unattractive. Now, as he bent over Sarah’s sleeping body and lightly kissed her closed eyelids, he felt his penis rise and chuckled to himself. “Down boy. We don’t wake sleeping beauties.” He covered Sarah with a light blanket before stripping off his clothes and climbing into bed beside her.

In the morning Sarah awoke in Jack’s arms, his smooth hairless chest on her pillow. She snuggled into her sleeping Prince Charming until his eyelids opened lazily.

“Good morning,” he said, kissing her softly on the lips.

Sarah smiled and Jack pulled her body atop his own. His passion rekindled, he lifted her upward and pressed his mouth over the fullness of her breast.

Nature took its inevitable course. Friends and lovers, Jack and Sarah came together in a whoop of release, their loving spirits interwoven.

Sarah smiled with satisfaction as she climbed out of bed. “I’ll make the pancakes this morning.”

Three hours later Jack drove the van into Sarah’s drive as far as he could without driving over lumber. As he lifted her two suitcases out he said, “Can you manage this alone? I’ve got to get going.”

“Sure, fine. Thanks again, Jack.”

Jack pecked the top of her head with his lips. “I’ll be talking to you,” he said, as he jumped back into the van. Sarah stood in the driveway and watched as the van backed out and then zoomed forward, exhaust fumes filling the air as it disappeared down the street.

Mesmerized, Sarah remained in the driveway wondering when she would wake up from this dream. She sighed, put the straps of her purse around her neck, and picked up her suitcases, her shoulder’s slumping from the weight. She half carried and half dragged the bags to the bottom of the steps, put them down, and caught her breath. Then, with her purse dangling against her breasts, she turned the larger Samsonite sideways, held onto the leather handle with both hands, and thumped the suitcase up one step at a time.

She’d lived through the hideous week in Chicago. Thump. She’d lived through the divorce. Thump. Jack had made love to her. Thump, thump. Now she felt like a complete woman; she had a friend and a lover.

Thump. She had a job. With the \$150 a week she earned working half-days, and the divorce settlement, her financial woes should ease. Thump, thump, thump.

Sarah left the suitcase on the top step — the landing wasn’t large enough for her and the suitcase. She was so glad to be home at last. She removed the purse straps from around her neck and dug for her keys.

Aiming the key at the keyhole, she saw, fluttering under the doorknob, a piece of white paper tucked into the crack of the door frame.

CHAPTER 26

“Sarah, I’m barely in the door! It’s been less than an hour since I dropped you off. What’s happened? You sound terrible.”

“I am terrible. In one week I’ve been divorced, evicted, and fired. That’s what!”

“Jesus!” Jack groaned. “Whoa, Sarah. Tell me what happened.”

“I found an eviction notice jammed in my door. That son-of-a-bitch, Bill . . . my studio is finally finished, my apartment livable, thanks to you, and now Bill wants to move into *my* apartment. I called his office and Bill’s secretary said, ‘the building’s for sale.’ I don’t believe that for one minute. I called Leonard to tell him I’d be back to work tomorrow and he tells me, ‘I’m closing my San Pedro office and moving to Oregon. I won’t need you anymore.’ That job was only part-time, but I need the money. Jack, tell me what to do.”

Jack moaned into the phone, “That’s a bunch of shit to come down on you all at once, but you’re strong, Sarah, you’ll make it. Bill may really want to sell. Call me tomorrow and tell me how you’ve worked it out. If worse comes to worse, you can always move in with me. I’m never home anyway.”

Sarah hung up, too befuddled to analyze the meaning of Jack’s words. Her second suitcase still at the door, she dropped her jeans and blouse on the floor and went to bed in her panties. She pulled the covers up to her chin and fingered her litany of grief like a rosary.

An hour later a filled bladder forced Sarah out of bed. Stomping into the bathroom, she muttered, “Living alone is shit! I never thought I’d end up alone.” She sat on the toilet moaning, “This apartment stinks, so why does it bother me that I have to move? Because I have no place else to go, that’s why.” She wiped herself, rinsed her

hands, and then, cursing and angry, she yanked open the mirrored cabinet above the sink, looking for toothpaste.

The cabinet, hung by four loose screws in the dry wall, groaned and hurled onto Sarah's bare arms. The cord from the wall socket to the mirror held her like an umbilical cord, while jars, bottles, and pills pelted her as she gripped the open-faced cabinet to keep it from smashing to the floor.

"DAMN IT TO HELL!" Sarah screeched, as she supported the cabinet on the edge of the sink with her stomach. "YOU ROTTEN BASTARDS!" She cursed her landlord, her ex-husband, and men in general. Sarah could hear her mother's accusatory voice in her ears, "Why aren't you more careful? You're so clumsy." Sarah wanted to drop the damn cabinet, but then the mirror would smash into a thousand pieces and she'd have seven more years of bad luck.

Slowly, Sarah raised her right foot to the toilet seat and pushed the mirror onto her propped knee. She eased the weight of the cabinet down to the toilet, grateful the lid was down. Why wouldn't it be? There was no man around to leave it up.

Sarah unplugged the cord from the mirror and stared at the cabinet, at rest on the toilet, and wondered how she would wrestle the damn thing out of the way when she next had to pee. She stared at her thighs and arms, already puffy and turning from red to black and blue. Growling, she limped back to bed. If life was a battle, then damn it, she'd learn to play the game. She couldn't remain a child and win.

After a restless night of ouching when she turned over on her bruises, Sarah could not face the day. She turned the electric blanket to high and tried to read. Unable to concentrate, she threw the book to the end of the bed, leaned back against the propped-up pillows, and talked to her dead father. "I know you can hear me, Daddy. I know you can. Tell me what to do." Was it desperation, a trick of memory, or did Bart really communicate with his daughter? Sarah wasn't sure, but she knew with certainty she heard his voice and she listened closely to his advice.

“Pay cash for anything you purchase. Never buy on credit. If you don’t have the cash, stay out of the stores and don’t buy a thing until you do. Never, ever take out a second mortgage; the first mortgage is the first to be repaid, and there might not be any cash left to pay off the second.”

Bart’s dinner table conversation; his advice about business; his values of honesty, integrity, and ambition were loud and clear, and Sarah moaned, “Oh, Daddy, if you were alive, none of this would have happened.”

* * *

The nurse cranked up the hospital bed and the mattress became a backrest for four-and-a-half-year-old Sarah. She held a fat, blue Crayola clutched between her chubby fingers. Laughing, she colored while her “older” roommate of seven asked, “I thought you were supposed to go home last week? I heard the doctor say you could. How come you’re still here?”

“I dunno. Maybe cause . . .”

Sarah spied her Daddy peeping around the half-open door before she finished her sentence. Bart held his forefinger in front of his lips in a shushing manner as he approached Sarah’s bed. “Shush, Baby,” he said as he bent over and whispered in Sarah’s ear, “Be real quiet, Honey. I’m going to kidnap you and I don’t want anyone to hear.”

“What’s kidnap, Daddy?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Bart whispered back. “Just be real quiet now.” Bart closed the curtain between the two beds, wrapped Sarah in a blanket he’d brought with him, picked his daughter up in his arms, and carried her to the door. He peeked out into the corridor and said, “It’s all clear, Baby, we’ll make a run for it. Be very quiet. Quiet as a mouse.”

Bart held Sarah tight in his arms while he trotted down the empty hallway to the exit sign and then held her under one arm as he opened the door. He raced down one flight of steps and stopped on the landing to catch his breath for a moment. Then he ran

down two more flights with his daughter clinging to his neck. He fled down another flight to the hospital basement, out a side door, and within minutes he had Sarah tucked into the front seat of his eight-year-old Opel Regent. He laughed as he throttled the engine and zoomed out of the hospital parking lot. “Okay, Baby, now I’ll tell you about kidnap.”

* * *

As a teenager, Sarah asked her father about that incident. He was surprised she remembered, but explained. “It was the depression, Baby, and I didn’t have the money to pay for your mastoid operation. You were well and the hospital wouldn’t discharge you until the bill was paid, and every day the bill got higher. That’s why I kidnapped you. It took me years to pay off that bill. Years! But I paid back every cent I owed,” Bart said with obvious pride.

Sarah pressed back into the pillows, her throat knotted with loss and love for her father. He was an honest man. He’d paid off the whole hospital bill. She wished he were still alive and would kidnap her right now and save her from the mess her life had become. She closed her eyes and talked to her “Daddy” as if he were in the room. “I’ll never, ever stop missing you. You taught me values with your stories—I still remember the lessons. I tell the truth. I don’t lie. I pay cash, or I don’t buy anything. I’m not in debt. Once in a while I splurge and buy myself one yellow rose or a book, but not too often. I don’t gamble.” Sarah laughed out loud remembering how Bart had taught her not to gamble.

* * *

Bart brought home a slot machine when Sarah was an eighth grader and within ten minutes she’d lost her weekly allowance playing that damn thing. Sarah chuckled as she remembered pleading with her father to return her allowance.

“It’s not fair, Daddy, you brought home that slot machine and it ate all of my money. Please give me back my allowance. Please.” Sarah could see herself following

her father down to the basement where he pried open the back of the one-armed bandit with a screwdriver and announced, "The house gets 80 to 90 percent, so you can't win, Baby. Don't ever gamble, you'll lose. If you promise me you'll never gamble, I'll return your allowance," he said, as he reached into the bowels of the machine for nickels and piled five dollars' worth into Sarah's cupped hands.

* * *

Leaving Bob was one gamble Sarah took and the house was still winning the pot! Bart had taught his daughter not to gamble. But he did. Sarah remembered one of the trips to or from California when they'd stopped for the night in Reno, Nevada. She remembered a store window filled with silver dollars. She remembered the night in the hotel when Bart removed his diamond pinkie ring, his diamond tie tac, and his diamond studded watch. He'd peeled off a big roll of bills and handed the money and jewelry to his mother-in-law. "I've taken the money I want, Etta," he said. "You keep the rest for me. No matter what I do, or how I plead, don't give this gelt back to me till morning."

In the middle of the night Sarah awoke to pounding on the locked door and heard her father shout, "God damn it, Etta! Open this damn door!" Banging on the door with his fist, he cursed, "God damn you, it's my money. Open this door and give me my diamond ring!" The pounding grew louder and then faded away. In the morning Etta handed her son-in-law his watch, ring, tie tac, and his fat roll of bills without saying a word. Bart buzzed her on the cheek and said, "Bless you, Etta. I knew you wouldn't give in, no matter what I said or did." Bart's eyes were bloodshot, his face drained of color when he said, with a sheepish expression on his face, "It's a damn good thing I didn't give the money to Elizabeth, or we wouldn't have had enough money to finish this trip. We'd be stranded and I'd have ended up doing the dishes to pay our way out of here."

Sarah slid out of bed, cursing that bathroom mirrored cabinet as the sheet tugged on her black and blue thighs. She stamped into the kitchen and dragged a wooden step

stool into the bathroom, mounted the sink, and peed. Some Lady-of-the-Manor! Evicted from a dump — what a joke. She washed and dried her hands, and watched as hot water sterilized the receptacle.

In the kitchen she turned the gas on under the kettle, stood in the doorway, and looked at the pseudo-couch in the living room. One side of it, supported by bricks, listed lower to the floor than the other. She thought of the twins' scratched dressers in the bedroom and remembered how many times she'd emptied the drawers to spray for roaches.

The kettle whistled and Sarah rushed to the kitchen and poured boiling water over the bouillon cube that rested at the bottom of a pottery mug. She carried the mug to the glass-topped table and slumped on an ice cream parlor chair. Not one to give herself any slack, she blamed herself for the pitiful divorce settlement. She'd spent so much time in her lawyer's office bitching about her half of the Great Books, that she hadn't asked the right questions. But what were the right questions? Those she did ask were ignored. How many times had that damn lawyer said, "Trust me. Just say, yes."

Sarah had "yessed" her way through life and she was sick of it. This apartment was a dump, but it was the only security she had. She wouldn't move out until she was damn good and ready.

Sipping the remains of her lukewarm drink, she pondered again the wisdom of truth telling. During the divorce proceedings, she'd told the truth and lost while Bob had lied and won.

Back in bed, she kicked the top sheet off—the mid-day sun had finally warmed the apartment. She fluffed her pillows, picked up her writing materials from the spot next to her pillow where she'd left them, considered for a moment or two, then wrote.

* * *

"Now, Sarah, be a good girl." Elizabeth said, as she smoothed down the white hospital sheet and tucked it under her daughter's chin. "Be good, Honey, pretty soon the

nurses will come for you. They'll put you on a cart that rolls and they'll give you a nice ride down the hall to the birthday party."

"A party?"

"Yes, Honey, pretty soon. Be good."

In the operating room the nurses lifted four-and-a-half-year-old Sarah from the gurney to the operating table and a man with a white mask removed the bandage from her ear. Struggling, Sarah pulled away shouting, "I wants burstay cake."

A black-garbed nun pushed Sarah flat on the table and pinned her arms down while Sarah twisted and squirmed. Blinking her eyes repeatedly, she yelled, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy said burstay."

"You're a bad girl. A very bad girl! Lay still. This is no party!" the mean-faced nun shouted, her white coif tight under her wattle chin. She held Sarah pinned to the table, her beak nose an inch from the patient's face, and yelled, "Strap this brat down, and hurry up with the ether." The last thing Sarah remembered were circles and circles of ever deepening black as she went into an ether-induced sleep.

* * *

Aggravated by the memory of another one of Elizabeth's lies, Sarah pounded her heels into the mattress. "Damn her, she's a moral coward, always taking the easy way out." Sarah never lied to her sons. When Johnny had his tonsils out, Sarah prepared him for surgery, not a birthday party. The sweet young nun who nursed him told Sarah that John's behavior in surgery was exemplary, "The best patient I've ever had."

Johnny was told the truth and had a choice. Sarah never had that privilege. Holding her fist under her chin, Sarah remembered another time when her mother had lied to her. She picked up her notebook again and wrote.

* * *

Elizabeth hid Sarah's gift behind her back and asked her three-year-old daughter, "Have you been a good girl?"

The back of Sarah's neck wrinkled as she stretched her face upward to look in her mother's eyes while she nodded her head up and down.

"Mrs. Jensen said you were a good girl, so I'll give you your present." Sarah giggled as she held the white cardboard box trimmed with a green line with both hands. Then she placed the box on her child-sized cardboard table and peered through the clear box top and chortled, "Oh Mommy. Me want deechez me whole life!"

El laughed and said, "Your whole life, Sarah? You're only three. And say *I* not *me*."

Sarah wrapped her arms around her mother's leg, repeating, "Tank you, tank you," until her mother patted her head and said, "I'll help you open the box, then you set the table with the china dishes. See, there's toy silverware, too. You set the table while I talk to Mrs. Jensen. Call me when you have the table set and we'll have a tea party."

Little Sarah hummed and sing-songed, "tea-party, tea-party, Mommy and me . . ." as she placed each plate and each tea cup and saucer precisely on the table as she'd watched Mommy do so many times. She lined up the silverware neatly side by side as Grandma had taught her, and then she ran to the kitchen for paper napkins. Mrs. Jensen handed Sarah the napkins and then sat back down at the kitchen table and continued talking with Elizabeth.

"Almost ready, Mommy," Sarah shouted as she skipped past her mother and into her bedroom. She folded the napkins, pressed them with her small folded fist, touched each piece of silverware again, placed the tea pot, sugar bowl, and creamer in the center of the table, and called out, "Ready, Mommy," and then louder, "*Ready, Mommy.*"

Sarah heard the front door close and rushed into the living room. She could hear a car engine sputter, cough, and then start. She stood in the middle of the farm house living room, her lower lip drooped as she asked, "Where's Mommy? Mrs. Farmer, where's me Mommy? She pomised. She pomised to have a tea party wiff me."

"She had to leave, Sarah. She didn't want to upset you by saying good-bye."

“She pomised. She pomised. I wan Mommy. I wanmemama,” Sarah whined, stomping her polished white high-tops on the living room floor.

“Stop crying. *Right now!* Don’t be a naughty girl.” Mrs. Jensen wiped the child’s tear-stained face with her clean white apron, took her hand and dragged her, still crying, into the kitchen. “Now, Sarah, be a good girl and watch me clean and pluck the chicken,” Mrs. Jensen said, as she removed her clean apron and replaced it with one that was blood-stained.

Sarah looked at the lifeless chicken and shuddered, remembering that early this morning she’d watched that same chicken running around the barnyard in circles with its head chopped off.

“I killed this chicken so we can have a nice baked chicken dinner. Mr. Farmer loves his baked chicken. He’s a good man. Remember how he carried you piggy-back around the whole farm when you came to live with us? He showed you the ducks and the chickens, the cows and the pigs, the dogs and the cats. After dinner, if you’re a good girl, I’ll ask him to make shadow figures on the wall with his fingers, and you can watch the make-believe animals move on the wall in the firelight, and the two of you can go moo-moo, cluck, cluck.”

Sarah giggled and said, “Moo, moo, cluck, cluck,” as she stood near the cast-iron stove and watched Mrs. Farmer wave the chicken back and forth over the open flame. “Got to get rid of those chicken feathers that stick to the skin,” Mrs. Farmer said, as the odor of burnt flesh gagged Sarah, and she covered her mouth with her hand, swallowed and headed for the living room.

“Come back here! *Right now.*” Sarah swallowed hard and returned to Mrs. Farmer’s side. The woman laid the fowl on the sink and dug her hand deep into the entrails. Clots of dried blood dropped into the sink and splashed fresh red blood on the dried blood on her apron.

Mrs. Jensen placed the chicken in a black iron skillet and said, “Now wasn’t that fun, Sarah? Now, be a good girl. Go play with the blocks your mother brought the last

time she came to visit. You're a very lucky girl, with a good mother like that who brings you presents. She brings you a present every time she comes to visit.

* * *

Sarah sat upright in bed, repulsed at the memory of clotted chicken blood sticking to Mrs. Jensen's apron. No wonder Sarah refused to clean chicken. As soon as the twins could reach the sink, she paid them a quarter to do the job. She couldn't remember what she did before that — probably never served chicken. Sarah remembered telling the twins, "If I have to clean that chicken, I won't be able to eat it!" All the neurotic things she did seemed to be based on some suppressed memory. Maybe it was true that as you aged, your childhood memories returned. Sarah blinked her eyes again and twisted her wrists back and forth.

Sarah stayed in bed for the rest of the day, self-pity smothering her like a pillow. That night she fell asleep early and dreamt she was pregnant. Her stomach was transparent and she could see her baby's perfectly formed fingers and toes. In the dream, Sarah held her hands over her pregnant stomach and cradled the child within as she raced to the hospital to give birth. The hospital elevator had gone berserk. When Sarah pressed the up button, the elevator descended at a dizzying speed.

Sarah was giving birth, all right. To herself. After her shower, she called her landlord's secretary and announced, "I want the bathroom cabinet up on the wall when I return from my errands. I will not tolerate any excuses."

Back in the bathroom, she covered the black and blue marks on her neck with makeup. She hid the discolorations on her arms with a long-sleeved blouse. Fully dressed, she located the legal aid office in the phone book, and scribbled down the address. Then she galloped out of her apartment, running for her life.

She drove to the legal aid office, walked in, and asked for help. A handsome woman in her early forties told a discouraged Sarah, "I'm really sorry. I'd like to help

you with your eviction problem, but you don't qualify for aid. You own your own car and a television set. You're too well-off to be eligible."

Defeated, Sarah turned to leave, but the woman detained her: "Wait, Ms. Shallot. I'll be right back."

A few minutes later, the woman attorney returned with four pages of photocopies on eviction statutes. "I've made these copies about eviction for you," she said. "Maybe they'll be of some help."

"Thank you very much. I really appreciate your help."

"I wish I could do more," the attorney said, patting Sarah's arm. Even the gentle touch to Sarah's bruises hurt, and she winced from pain. She thanked her benefactor again, and the attorney said, "We women have to stick together." Then, turning on her heel, she walked to the bedraggled woman waiting to speak to her.

The first thing Sarah did when she returned to her apartment was check the bathroom. The cabinet was nailed and taped to the drywall and she breathed a sigh of relief. Demanding her rights had paid off.

For the next hour, Sarah read and reread the five pages on eviction. Then she showered for the second time that day and masked her face completely: moisturizer, foundation, lots of shadow cover to erase her fatigue, powder, rouge, brown eye shadow, black eye liner, mascara. She applied two shades of lipstick, one over the other, a trick she'd learned while modeling. Next Sarah dragged her unpacked suitcase from the living room to the bedroom and hoisted it onto the bed. Removing her purple suede divorce skirt, she smoothed it down with her hand and slipped the skirt over her slender hips. Choosing a faded pink silk blouse from her closet, she tied a multi-colored scarf at a jaunty angle around her neck and tucked her toes into three-inch heeled shoes.

On all fours, Sarah dragged a box out from the bottom of the closet and topped her self-production with her lady-of-the-manor brown suede slouch hat. She pulled the suede hat well down over her right eye with the same movements she'd watched Bart use

so many times. Sarah, aware she planned to parrot her father's chutzpah, grabbed her leather purse off the bed and headed out the door.

She drove to the real estate agency where Bill had an office, marched inside like an executive of General Motors, and asked to see Bill's partner, whom she had never laid eyes on.

In Victor Warner's plush office in Rolling Hills, she sat well back in her chair, crossed her legs slowly, and accepted the cigarette and light that Victor offered. "Please, call me Victor," he said, "and may I call you, Sarah?" Sarah recognized the glint of interest in Victor's eyes and she knew her short skirt and hat were working. So far, so good.

"How can I help you?" Victor said in a slimy voice as he winked.

Sarah smoothed her skirt over her knees and said with conviction, "Of course you realize, Victor, that legally it would take you months to evict me, but there is no need for that. I understand the building is for sale, so I've decided to purchase it. Of course I'll want time to check the building codes. That will take over a month. And of course escrow will take time, too." The legal words, so new to Sarah, seemed to work. She had read the eviction statutes over and over again. Victor seemed to believe her. Only Sarah knew her capital consisted of her banked \$500.00. Pacifying her guilty conscience for lying, Sarah half convinced herself that if her settlement money arrived before the time was up, she really could buy the building.

Victor stood and offered his hand, eyeing Sarah from pumps to hat. With a smarmy smile, he said, "Very well, Sarah, we'll rescind the eviction notice."

Sarah left Victor's office, the victor with six months grace to find another place to live. Barely able to contain her laughter until she reached the car, Sarah slid behind the wheel giggling, "I did it! Thank you, Daddy." She checked her eyes in the rear-view mirror, and the sparkle lit up her face. "I know, I'll share this with Gloria face to face. She's always begging me to come visit."

Sarah drove to Hermosa Beach, jubilant with her success, and anxious to receive Gloria's approval of her winning action. Maybe she'd be invited to dinner. Sarah stopped to purchase a bottle of inexpensive wine in anticipation.

Gloria met Sarah at the front door and hugged her in the entrance while Sarah crowed about Victor and escrow. Gloria seemed distracted and uninterested. She kissed Sarah on the cheek, said "congratulations," and then gently shoved her visitor toward the open door.

"Gloria, why are you shoving me out the door? I haven't seen or talked to you since I got back from Chicago, and you're always begging me to drive over. I remembered you had this afternoon off."

Gloria tutted, her tongue seemed glued to the roof of her mouth. "I didn't want to tell you, but Jack's on his way over here."

"I didn't know you were seeing Jack. You never mentioned that he visited you. Does he come to see you often?"

"No, Sarah, we haven't slept together, if that's what you're getting at. But . . . oh hell, Sarah, he'll be here any minute. I'll call you and explain. It's nothing. Really. Jack's bringing me a cage for Blythe's mouse. You know what twelve-year-olds are like. Damn it, Sarah, go home."

Sarah giggled as she headed back to the Pontiac. Some welcome. All dressed up and no place to go. But before she reached her car, there was Jack, all smiles as he walked toward her.

"God, Sarah," he said, "you look great. Turn around, let me look at all of you. Jesus," he whistled, "you're not wearing jeans, and what gams, they go all the way up to your ass."

Men! Sarah thought. Just three days ago she was ass naked in his bed, and now he goes banana's because she had a skirt on. Jack wrapped his arm around Sarah and said, "How come you haven't called me? What did you do about your eviction? I would have called but I had a rush job." Sarah mumbled, "Victor and escrow," and Jack

insisted she return to Gloria's house with him. "I want to hear all about your lies that worked," he said as they walked to the front door. Gloria was still standing in the entrance and greeted them with, "Hi, Sarah. Back so soon? I thought you couldn't stay."

At the kitchen table, Jack and Sarah relaxed, while Gloria eyed them suspiciously, tension etching her face.

"See, Sarah, I knew you could handle all the shit that came down on you. If I'd done it for you, you wouldn't feel this pride. This is great, you're finally learning how to take care of yourself." Jack was proud of his protégé.

Gloria, unusually quiet, thanked Jack for the mouse cage and asked, "Would you two like to stay for dinner?"

"Sure," Jack said.

"No, thanks anyway," Sarah responded. "I've got a million things to do." Actually, she didn't have a damn thing to do, but she knew Glo would have a fit if she stayed.

Driving home, Sarah wondered if Jack was attracted to Gloria. She was his age, funny, and cute, with her flaming red hair. She sure didn't look Jewish. Sarah knew she had a better figure than Glo, but that didn't console her. She also knew why Jack's friends called him Jocko. He was a jock, a Don Juan who was attracted to any woman with a good pair of gams, and Glo had great legs.

So did all the ninny's Jack brought to Sarah's apartment. She hated meeting his new lovers. Maybe now that they'd slept together again, he'd stop that. He sure preferred white women, but then the only thing black about Jack was his afro hairstyle. With his hat on, he looked more Italian than black — just like his cousin.

By the time Sarah drove into the driveway, she had convinced herself that she had to stop thinking about Jack. She had other fish to fry. And Gloria . . . why was she so casual about Sarah's problems when she expected Sarah to be very, very serious about hers? Damn both of them. No, they were Sarah's good friends. Her best friends. Her only friends.

Around 6:00 P.M., Sarah stepped into her apartment and switched on the radio, then switched it off again when she heard, “You are the sunshine of my life . . .” No more brooding about Jack. She’d concentrate on buying property.

Sarah showered for the third time that day and scrubbed off her heavy makeup. She pulled on a flannel nightgown, and then pushed her boxed lady-of-the-manor hat to the back of the closet, along with her divorce skirt.

She nibbled on a tuna fish sandwich, sipped at her tea, and by 7:30 she was sitting at her desk, typing a letter to her mother.

Dear Mom,

When we had lunch at Phil Smidt’s, just before I left for California, you offered to help me. I’ve never asked you for anything before, but now I do need help. Will you lend me \$5,000 for six months? Surely I’ll have my divorce settlement by then, if not before, and I’ll pay you back the money with interest.

The area I live in is due for restoration in the next few years. If I buy this apartment and house in front for \$20,000, using the \$5,000 as a down payment, in a few years my investment will have increased considerably and I can sell at a profit. In the meantime, the house in front rents for \$250 a month and that money would be enough to pay the mortgage and the taxes.

I lost my job the day I returned from Chicago, but I’m sure I’ll land another one as soon as I have time. Please let me know your decision as soon as possible. Thanks.

Love,
Sarah

Before Sarah even had a chance to read the want-ads, El’s reply arrived:

My Dearest Sarah,

You didn’t ask for my advice. You never do. But as your mother, I have a right to give it to you. I thought I would LET you do whatever you wanted when I LET you move to California. My advice to you is to get out of that run-down neighborhood. Concentrate on your education, get the degree and get a well-paying job in an office. I was a good secretary, and you can be, too.

I cannot lend you any money.

All my love,
XXXX OOOO

Mom

LET ME! Not that again, Sarah thought, as she balled up her mother's letter in fury and dropped it into the waste basket. LET ME! Did Bob and Elizabeth go to the same school of power and control? Sarah reached into the waste basket, smoothed out her mother's letter, and reread it. More livid with anger after the second reading, she fumed, "She doesn't give a damn about me. Bob couldn't care less what happens to me. Jack acts as if nothing special has happened between us. And Gloria? What kind of friend is she? If I don't agree with her, she puts me down just the way Bob did. I'm the only one who gives a damn about me or my problems."

Sarah splashed cold water on her face at the kitchen sink and her anger slowly dissolved. Maybe the settlement money would arrive in time and she could purchase the building without help from anyone. It was a good investment. Daddy would have approved of her decision. He would have seen the possibilities.

Sarah's coupling with Jack the night she returned from Chicago had left her with more than memories. Another damn bladder infection forced her to spend most of her time in bed between the letter she'd written to her mother and her mother's reply. She'd laid in bed, hugging her hot pad, brooding and considering her options. She had checked with the city building inspectors and discovered that Bill had no permits for renovation. If she purchased the building, she would be liable for Bill's negligence. She decided to forget about buying the property, but to keep what she'd learned about the lack of building permits to herself.

She'd move out of this dump when she was damn good and ready. Picking up the Sunday want-ads, Sarah vowed to find a job before considering a move. She'd lie about her age and her qualifications if need be.

Sarah circled a few ads and then, feeling desperate, she typed out an imaginary résumé. For a first attempt at fudging her age and work experience, she thought her new

résumé was masterful fiction. The only problem would be remembering her new birthdate. If she were only thirty-eight, when did she graduate from high school? Lying was a pain. No wonder she never bothered before.

Sarah and a freshly typed copy of her fake résumé applied for a job at the UCLA Medical Center in Westwood Village. The village, over an hour's drive from San Pedro, didn't deter her. She had been driving back and forth to Hollywood two or three times a week for classes and could just stay in town until it was time to go to work. The ad in the *Los Angeles Times* had described the work: "Pre-registering incoming patients over the phone, from 4:00 to 8:00 P.M., five nights a week."

Sarah waited in the personnel office and overheard a distraught woman, about her age, say to the clerk, "Well, ah, no, I haven't worked in twenty years. I ah, raised a family. But I promise I'll work hard. I really need this job."

Sarah passed the initial screening in the personnel office and was directed to the head of the Registration Department. Mr. Kerrigan, a handsome Irishman in his early thirties, asked, "Do you have any previous experience registering patients?" Sarah visualized herself answering questions in doctor's offices, clinics, and hospitals. She visualized sitting on the other side of the desk, asking questions rather than answering them as she smiled and told Mr. Kerrigan what he wanted to hear.

Sarah accepted the job and at \$7.00 an hour. That plus the \$150 a week Bob would send, would pay for a decent apartment. She felt proud, too, that she'd held out and refused to begin her new job until the first Monday in March. Mr. Kerrigan wanted her to start the day after her interview, but she wanted a few weeks to recover.

On the long drive home, Sarah sang, "I've got a job! I did it!" She hummed, "Happy days are here again" for a few bars and then got serious. She had a job, now she'd need an apartment closer to U.C.L.A. This Sunday she'd peruse the *L.A. Times* for apartments rather than jobs.

She couldn't wait to share her good news with Jack and Gloria. Sarah knew Jack would care. Would Glo? Had those two been seeing each other behind her back? Before

her divorce, she was certain she understood Jack, now she wasn't so sure. He still arrived at her apartment once or twice a week, ate the dinner she prepared, drank his wine, but no matter how she hinted, he wasn't available physically. Damn it. The next time she laid eyes on him she was going to pin him to the wall and get some answers. Was she nothing but a Wednesday night gal? She knew he must be seeing someone else on Saturday night, for she spent every Saturday night alone. Sarah hummed, "Saturday night, the loneliest night of the week," before she said, "So what!" In a couple of weeks she'd be working right through the dinner hour and wouldn't be available on Wednesday's.

That night Sarah slid into bed, still congratulating herself on becoming a successful liar, proud that she had landed a job. She laid in the dark and heard a motorcycle rev up in the street. It sounded like the growl of a giant's stomach. Giants! She'd make love to King Kong if he asked her.

CHAPTER 27

Sarah doubled over the hot pad stretched across her stomach. In bed, the hot pad turned to high, she rocked back and forth and prayed that the antibiotic would soon kick in. She couldn't remember the name of the doctor in the hospital emergency room where she'd dragged herself at 7:00 A.M. She was sure he was a resident because of his youth, not a "real" doctor, even if he did wear a stethoscope around his neck.

She labeled the resident Dr. Zero when he winked at her and said, "You've got honeymoonitis. New lover, huh?" His knowing look infuriated Sarah. She wondered if sleeping with Jack the night she returned from Chicago as a divorced woman had precipitated her last bladder infection. Was this one a result of the blind date Gloria had arranged?

"Are you saying, Doctor, that I have a bladder infection?"

"Yes."

"I've had bladder infections off and on for years. I need some of those little red pain pills that turn my urine orange."

The "doctor," more serious now, wrote out Sarah's prescriptions. She stopped at Long's Drug Store to have them filled before returning to her apartment.

Now, at 10:00 A.M., she was miserable, afraid the outrageously expensive prescriptions wouldn't work. At least the infection had "hit her" on a Saturday or she'd have had to call in sick after working at U.C.L.A. Hospital for only a few weeks. "Jesus," all she needed now were medical expenses! And her check from Bob was late again.

Bob had dropped her name from his health insurance policy without even mentioning it. After the fact, Sarah learned she would have had thirty days to reinstate the policy in her own name. Now, of course, it was too late.

Sarah wondered if any company would insure someone with her medical history, even if she could afford to purchase a policy. Bob knew better than anyone how

important it was for Sarah to have medical coverage, but he couldn't have cared less. What if Sarah needed more surgery? How would she pay for it? There was one ray of hope: if she lasted at her job for three months, she'd be covered by U.C.L.A.'s medical plan.

The familiar throbbing pain reminded Sarah of her last surgery. She shuddered. She couldn't bear the thought of another operation. She'd kill herself before she'd endure that kind of torture again. Bob had promised to take care of her, in sickness and health, until death they did part. "That prick!" He didn't care what happened to her.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, loved caring for her sickly daughter.

* * *

Elizabeth carried a breakfast tray covered with a white linen napkin. She smoothed Sarah's top sheet, positioned the food-laden tray across her daughter's lap, and removed the napkin cover. "Now eat your pancakes, Honey. Do you want more butter or syrup?"

Elizabeth carried Sarah a lunch tray, a dinner tray, and in mid-afternoon a cup of hot tea and a cookie.

While Sarah nibbled on her macaroni and cheese, or creamed chicken on toast, or Jello, or rice pudding, Elizabeth would sit on the edge of the twin bed and ask her daughter how she felt, what mother could do to make her more comfortable, what she could buy Sarah at the dime store.

When Sarah finished "feeding a cold and starving a fever," Elizabeth would press her palm to Sarah's forehead to check for fever. Then she would kiss her daughter on the cheek before removing the breakfast, lunch, dinner, or tea tray. Elizabeth was a devoted mother—when Sarah was ill.

Mommy provided new story books, red BIG LITTLE BOOKS that were as fat as they were wide. She provided coloring books and Crayola's to keep Sarah occupied during her recuperation from the latest cold, or the measles, mumps, or chicken pox.

Sarah basked in her mother's attention, not minding her runny nose or scratchy throat. When the sniffles stopped, after three days, Sarah really enjoyed her stay in bed. She never colored the pictures in her coloring books. Instead, she drew free-hand or traced the image from the book on a white pad of paper. She drew Dutch girls wearing wooden shoes, Mexican men squatting next to stone walls, sombrero's covering their eyes. She traced Mary and her little lamb and drew Little Miss Muffet. When the drawings were completed, Sarah used her Crayola's to color her own work. If Sarah really felt good, Elizabeth would bring her a glass of water, her watercolors, and paint brush so she could paint her pictures.

While concentrating on her "work," Sarah listened to radio serials: "The Romance of Helen Trent," "Ma Perkins," and "Stella Dallas." She hated the thought that when she returned to school, she'd miss the next episode of her soap operas.

Those "sick" days Sarah spent in bed had compensations. She had time to read, draw, paint, listen to the radio, and daydream.

Sarah had two favorite daydreams. She'd lean back on her double fluffed pillows and visualize herself wearing wooden shoes and visiting Holland. She'd learned about that country in her fourth-grade geography class. When she grew up she wanted to visit all the countries she'd seen in her coloring books.

Sarah would visualize a large room filled with drawers and drawers. Each one a different height and width to hold every size of drawing paper. She liked the idea that each size sheet would have it's own place and wouldn't have to be piled one on top of another the way her mother stacked the dishes in the kitchen. Sarah visualized jars and jars filled with paint brushes, and chests filled with bottles of paint.

When Sarah's fever was down for three days, Elizabeth said, "Tomorrow's Friday, no sense sending you back to school on a Friday, but for sure on Monday you go back."

On Monday morning, Sarah reluctantly dressed for school. She stared at her brown shoes, her brown anklets, and the bottom of her brown skirt and repeated to

herself, “Shoe, ankle, leg, knee, leg,” before she left the bathroom. Once at school, she forgot about the “soap operas” and enjoyed Miss Anna, her favorite teacher, reading from PETER PAN, a weekly event.

After school Sarah skipped home, eager to tell her mother about her day’s adventure only to find the maid, who announced, “Your mother’s at the beauty shop. After, she’s going to South Chicago to see your Grandmother. She’ll be gone for a couple of days. Now change your shoes and dress and stay out of my way. I have to fix dinner for you and your father.”

When Elizabeth returned she’d lost interest in her healthy daughter and resumed her “shoulds,” “musts,” and “ought tos.” Elizabeth’s “good mothering” would return the next time Sarah was sick with a cold, flu, or “catching” disease.

Bob would also nurture Sarah when she returned home from a surgery, but by the end of the week, he wanted her up, dressed, and in the kitchen. She’d complain to Louise, who would remind her, “Don’t get out of your bathrobe, Sarah, until you’re really ready to return to duty. It might have taken you all day to get dressed and put on your lipstick, but if a man sees you dressed, it’s all over; then he expects his three squares a day. On time.”

* * *

Sarah hugged her hot pad and wished she were hugging Louise. She missed talking to Lou every day. She felt blessed when she could afford to call her once a month. Sarah missed Louise, she missed the twins, and she missed the Bob of her youth. His sun-licked body smelling sweet after a day at the beach.

With her eyes closed, Sarah ran her tongue over her lower lip and could almost feel Bob’s lips on hers. She remembered a sunny mid-December day when she was pregnant with twins. Bob had built her a snowman in the yard that separated the “Poo House” from the DOG HOUSE and decorated the “face” with coal eyes and a carrot nose. The snowman was taller than Sarah, but not as wide. She remembered listening to

the strains of her favorite Christmas song, “Walking In a Winter Wonderland,” as the music blared on the radio inside the house, the melody drifting out the open kitchen window while Sarah tied a bright scarf around the snowman’s neck and stood on tip-toe to place an old fedora of Bart’s on its icy head.

Sarah embraced the memory of the feel, scent, and sound of Bob as he kissed her rosy cheeks, “Wait’ll you have the baby, Sarah. I’ll teach him to play ball. It’ll be great to have a son. I’ve been surrounded by women all my life.”

“I love you soooo much, Honey,” Bob laughed, as he gently patted Sarah’s bulging stomach. “Soon there’ll be three. Your pregnancy makes you even more beautiful.” Bob kissed Sarah on the nose, “Aren’t we lucky? We married so young. Now we’ll have all those extra years together.”

Sarah played with her Bob memories and tortured herself. As her physical pain lessened, she turned the hot pad down to medium, and wondered if, thanks to her mother, she liked being sick? If so, that was *really sick*.

As a child, those days confined to bed had offered comfort and her mother’s attention. Taking to her bed in Vanderville had offered escape from responsibilities for a few days, even if she received little attention from Bob.

Where was the pay-off for illness now? No one knew Sarah was sick, and if they had, they wouldn’t coddle her. Sarah thought if anyone magically appeared and offered her a cup of tea she’d be in heaven.

Sarah had carried many a tray to the twins when they had mumps, followed by measles, followed by chicken pox. All those childhood diseases in less than six months. She’d complained to Dr. Guthrie — the psychiatrist she’d seen weekly for nine months following her hysterectomy — “I try to be as good a mother to my sons when they’re ill as my mother was to me.”

“You’ve got it backward, Sarah. You treat your sons well whether they’re sick or not. You’re a good mother, full-time. Your mother encouraged ill health so she could feel powerful and in control. You couldn’t get into mischief — I doubt if you ever got

into mischief—when you were confined to bed. She felt safe when you were ill. She encouraged illness rather than health.”

Dr. Guthrie, the behavioralist, continued, “Now you have to stop coddling the twins. If they are well enough to eat, they are well enough to come to the table. No more carrying trays. Your mother had full-time help and one child. You have two children and minimal help.”

“In the morning, I want you to take their temperatures. If both are normal, send them to school. They’re malingering because you’ve made it so comfortable for them to be at home.”

Sarah fiddled with the temperature control and turned it back up to high. Bob was so certain he’d have a son. “You do everything right, Honey, I know you’ll give me a son,” he’d said, his arm around her as she stood at the hospital reception desk, ready to be admitted for delivery.

When Sarah surprised the doctor and herself by delivering twin sons, she whispered in a drugged state, “Doctor, bend down so I can give you a kiss for giving me two sons. My husband will be so happy. He was only expecting one son, and you gave him two.”

“I didn’t give him his sons. You did,” the doctor chuckled. “Kiss your husband.” And she did as soon as she returned to her room.

Sometimes when Sarah remembered Bob’s sweetness in the early days of their marriage, a smile would curl her lips. Then the loss of his love would consume her once more and she’d cover her mouth with both hands to stuff her misery back inside. “We did love each other so much,” she moaned. “How did this happen to us?”

Sarah dragged herself back into the windowless bathroom. The pain grabbed as she urinated; it felt like a little man inside pulling at her vagina. The pain was always the same—bladder infections or surgery — Sarah always suffered below the waist. She

thought of one of Bart's favorite expressions: "Not a pot to pee in, or a window to throw it out of."

Why had she returned to that butcher Steiner after he'd bungled her hysterectomy? How many medical misfits had touched her body? Sarah counted off her operations: mastoid at four, appendectomy at twelve, D&Cs between childbirth and the hysterectomy, a blood clot removed from her arm.

That minor surgery had also been bungled. Sarah had a local so she could hear the doctor and nurses talk about the latest movie they'd seen while they stitched up her arm. While she laid on the operating room table, some fool kicked it, and it swayed beneath her. Her scar was crooked from the unexpected movement. Sarah wondered what the doctors and nurses had discussed while six extra stitches were sewn into her ureter.

Sarah gently wiped herself and dragged back to bed. She curled up with the hot pad and slept the afternoon away. By early evening, her pain had lessened and she was bored. She eased out of bed and rummaged through the bottom drawer of her dresser. Lovingly she removed Bart's tie that was wrapped around a half-dozen photographs. She stared at a picture of Josh and Johnny wearing their mortar boards and black robes. She held the likeness to her lips, kissed her sons, and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

She wasn't much good to them now. They had their own lives. Sarah was so consumed with trying to figure out who she was and how she was going to support herself, that half the time she forgot she was ever a mother. The twins must have suffered from the divorce, too, but they never mentioned it. At least not to Sarah. When she'd told them she was going to leave their father, their only comment was, "You waited until we graduated from college, didn't you?"

In some ways the boys were more adult than Sarah. They were earning their own living, and supporting themselves. Would Sarah be as successful, or would she just remain a displaced housewife?

Sarah looked at another photograph of the twins. This one, taken at Easter, showed the twins dressed in matching gray-blue gabardine suits with striped “rep” ties like their father’s. Matching straw hats, like Bob’s, were perched on their heads. With a sigh, Sarah remembered how proud she’d been attending Mass with her three handsome “men.” Josh and Johnny were about ten then — so young, but then at thirty, so was Sarah.

Young? Sarah had never felt young in her life. She was “old” before she reached the age of ten. Running or shouting like the other children was forbidden. Nor could she raise her voice with excitement, not even slightly, without El “shushing” her. “Be quiet!” Elizabeth would hiss in a whisper. “Your father’s sleeping.” Sarah would then tip-toe back to her bedroom and read another Nancy Drew book to stay out of her mother’s way. If she crossed paths with Elizabeth on her way to the bathroom, her mother would wave a finger under Sarah’s nose and whisper, “Stop laying around in your room like a lazy girl. The sun’s out, go outside and play — but remember, no running or jumping.” On rainy days, Elizabeth would hiss, “You forgot to . . .” “Why didn’t you?” or “I told you to . . . and you should.”

The last time El called Sarah she scolded, “You never listen to me. I told you a hundred times it was a woman’s job to make her marriage work. If you’d done what Bob wanted, you’d still be married. Now that you’re divorced, how are you going to support yourself? I wish I could help you, but, of course, I can’t. I have to think about my own future.”

Sarah fingered several more photos and then, inspired, she searched for straight pins and pinned the photographs to her burlapped bedroom window. Standing back to admire the decor, Sarah realized that her marriage wasn’t a total loss; divorced or not, she had two wonderful sons.

She picked up Bart’s tie from the end of the bed and was about to return it to the dresser drawer when she remembered something Jack had said: “Sarah, your studio is filled with life and spirit. You have interesting things tacked on the walls, little objects

arranged around the room, mixed together in funny ways. Like that turn-of-the-century paper doll dress you tacked under the chin of that picture of you.

“Upstairs your apartment looks like suburbia; everything neat and in place. Why don’t you put some life and fun in your apartment the way you do in your studio? In the studio you’re more fun, you don’t complain ‘Bob did this, Bob did that.’”

Sarah pressed Bart’s tie smooth with her hand, walked into the living room, and thumb-tacked the tie to her unpainted bookcase. A wrinkle in the tie made the bulldog look as if it were winking. She giggled and winked back.

Feeling much better, she climbed back into bed, turned off the hot pad and dropped it to the floor. She fluffed up her two pillows, prepared to continue reading *Fear of Flying* when Doctor Zero’s words returned, “A new lover, huh?”

Her nose wrinkled in disgust as she thought of her date last week with Gloria’s cousin, Ira.

Since Sarah was a divorced woman, and hadn’t had a date in months, she’d finally succumbed to Gloria’s entreaties, “Come on, blind dates aren’t so bad.”

“I’ve been telling you for months, Gloria, that I hate blind dates. I had one in high school, and he had a large nose with a pimple on the end of it, just like I predicted he would.”

“My cousin, Ira is over six foot, and does not have a pimple on his nose. Get serious!” Gloria’s loud cackling laugh tickled Sarah and she felt so lonely and despondent she agreed to the date. “You won’t be sorry. Ira’s only been divorced a short time. He’s about your age, and he knows how to show a woman a good time — he told me so. He’ll buy you a good dinner, and maybe take you dancing. He’s handsome and a big spender. What more could you ask?”

Ira Kaplin showed up at Sarah’s front door carrying one fresh gardenia. Sarah hated gardenia’s but was touched that someone had brought her a flower. She put the stem in a vase of cold water. Gloria was right. He wasn’t bad looking. There was

something so familiar about him that she began to feel less nervous and more comfortable.

In his Porsche, listening to Sinatra on the tape deck, watching him sip from something liquid in a cup resting in the open ash tray, Sarah knew why Ira seemed familiar. He reminded her of Bob in his change-of-life phase.

Turning toward Sarah, Ira whistled low, winked at her, and said, “Gloria wasn’t exaggerating. She said you were a real looker.” He hummed a few lines from, “You must have been a beautiful baby, cause baby look at you now,” and Sarah realized Ira was older than the forty years he’d bragged about. She also realized he had a line, a line so obvious even she recognized it.

After twenty minutes behind the wheel, and a few more sips of gin, Ira said something real. “My ex-wife set a good table.” Sarah had to cover her mouth to hide her laughter. When Ira announced that he wanted a woman who would cater to his needs, and clean up after him, Sarah wanted to say, “Put an ad in the paper for a maid.” Instead, she smiled and asked, “Where are we going, Ira?”

“To Redondo Beach. I know a great little place that serves a good lobster.” He was a real jerk, but Sarah hadn’t had lobster since she left Bob.

After dinner, Ira took Sarah’s hand and they swung their arms back and forth while walking along the wharf. Maybe he wasn’t a jerk, just a lonely divorced man trying to find his way. She knew he hadn’t been divorced long because he wore his monogrammed gold ring on his middle finger, which meant he’d recently lost a lot of weight.

At midnight, back at Sarah’s apartment, Ira parked his car in the drive and asked her if he could come up for a drink of water, “I’m dying of thirst, all that rich food . . .”

Sarah hesitated and Ira said, “Come on, you have nothing to be afraid of. All I want is a glass of water and an aspirin and I’ll be on my way.”

Reluctantly, Sarah agreed. She’d had enough of him and never wanted to see him again. Fifteen minutes later, Sarah found herself pushed down on the living room carpet,

her skirt over her head. Her panties roughly pulled aside at the crotch and the “animal,” crouching above her, held her legs and ankles. She squirmed, struggled, and cried out, “Stop! Stop!”

“Lay still, don’t move, and don’t make a sound,” Ira threatened, as Sarah tried to roll out from under him, but he was too powerful.

Sarah clamped her mouth closed, stopped struggling, crunched her eyes closed and acquiesced. Seconds later, Ira stood up, zipped his fly, and asked Sarah to fill a paper cup with wine. Her face ashen, Sarah poured the wine, without uttering a word. Ira brushed past her, holding the paper cup, calling out, “See you,” and banged out the door.

Sarah crumpled to the floor. She felt nauseous and bewildered. Certain that she’d encouraged her blind date’s grotesque behavior, she blamed herself. “What did I do wrong?” she asked aloud. There was no doubt in her mind that she’d been raped. She never mentioned the incident to Gloria, or to anyone else.

CHAPTER 28

Sarah repressed the horror of the rape, just as she'd suppressed the horror of her father's murder. Her subconscious sent anxiety messages, but she had lived with disquietude for so long she thought it was normal to feel tense and anxious. She had never experienced serenity until...

Sarah's dream was so clear when she awoke that she reached for a tablet and pen on the bedside table and wrote as fast as she could, fearful she might forget a detail.

Mist shimmered on jagged rock as sunlight traced soft patterns of leaves against granite. We stood, my mother and I, on a high cliff, our outlines clearly silhouetted against the open expanse of azure-blue sky. Silence between us, our eyes locked in wordless embrace.

My mother stepped forward, perilously close to the cliff's edge, and peered over the side. Her body swayed off balance in an unexpected gust of wind and I grabbed for her. My motion, rather than preventing her fall, set the momentum and Elizabeth toppled head-first over Boundary Peak. Horrified, I lunged after her falling body and watched in disbelief as she disappeared into the mist while I floated downward and landed softly in fine cobalt-blue sand.

Frantic and filled with anxiety, I pawed the sand, repeating over and over, "If I don't find my mother, she'll die." Frenzied sand blew in all directions as I dug deeper searching for my mother. My hand touched a sharp object and I yelped in pain, licking red blood from my finger tip and cautiously searched for the sharp object buried in the sand. With both hands I retrieved a foot square Plexiglas object and held the transparent sheet upright. In horror I watched the image of my mother's face smear across the Plexiglas and slide downward distorting the eyes, nose, and lipsticked mouth.

In shock, I tucked the liquid face under my arm and raced to my home on Van Dyke Drive. I dashed up and down the steps of the tri-level screaming, “Bob! Bob, please help me.” Bob’s voice boomed down the empty stairs and bounced off the ceiling, “I’m not helping you. You’ll have to help yourself.”

I rushed from room to room searching for the kitchen, repeating, “I must find the refrigerator. I must freeze this face to preserve it.” I heard a gentle masculine voice whisper, “No, warmth is what your mother needs.”

I screamed, “Help. Help. Someone please help me.” No one responded. I shouted, “Bob, please Bob, call the doctor. The doctor will tell me what to do. Bob, please. If I don’t find my mother’s missing parts, she’ll die.” Bob’s cold, strained laughter filled the empty house. No one came to my aid.

Terrified, my body quivering, my heart pounding, I raced back to the sand, clutching the distorted face under my arm. It poked my side as I ran. My vision was distorted, like a telescope filled with multiples, as I searched in vain for the hole I had dug. As my eyes cleared, I beheld a luminous oblong box shaped like a casket. The crystalline box gleamed through a haze of purple mist. Tiny silver stars twinkled and floated in the air above my head as I approached the sarcophagus and peered inside. The sickening odor of decaying gardenias rose from the transparent coffin as I inspected the interior.

At the bottom a vibrant, silver line traced the outline of a woman’s body, a body that had no feature, no face or breasts, just their outlined space. A two-inch cube of Plexiglas defined the navel and the word guts flashed on and off while the cube twirled like a top spinning, guts, guts, guts. Silver spokes of light radiated from the three-dimensional cube and formed a star shape around the miniature sculpture.

As the casket dissolved in the mist, my mother reappeared. She sat, unruffled and dignified, in an armchair upholstered in yellow tea roses. Her slender nylon-covered legs, crossed at the knee, were visible below her beige silk tunic. Her hands were folded in lady-like repose on her lap, her face looked young and unlined, her body graceful. She

smiled warmly at me and said, “Thank you. It was worth all the pain, for now I look and feel like a new person.”

My mother’s image became a gleaming mirror and I viewed my own reflection.

Sarah brushed her teeth and spit hit the sink as she considered the fearful dream that had ended in repose. She’d been afraid of something or other as far back as she could remember. But fear never kept her from doing what she thought she must. She was terrified to leave Bob and drive alone cross-country, and yet she had. She took no pride in that, or anything else.

Sarah spit into the sink again, wiped her mouth, and turned off the tap. She slipped out of her nightie, adjusted the water temperature in the shower, and stepped inside the metal stall. The drain was permanently plugged and water rose around her ankles as she scrubbed down. She stood in the muck and mire and giggled, “I’ve cried so much I’ve filled up the shower. *Death by Tears* — great title for a book.” She turned off the water as soon as possible, stepped out of the shower, dripped across a throw rug and onto the wooden floor of the bedroom, glanced at the clock, and muttered, “Good God!” Amazed that she’d spent the entire morning writing in bed. If she didn’t get a move on, she’d be late for her philosophy class and probably late for work, too.

By 7:30 P.M., she was bleary eyed from fatigue and struggled through the last half hour before quitting time. Her head throbbed as she listened to another patient’s complaint. “My constipation is so bad, I haven’t been able to take a good crap for over a week. Can a person die from not eliminating?”

The shit was coming out of his mouth, Sarah thought. Aloud she responded, “I’m not a doctor or a nurse, I can’t give you advice. All I can do is register you for an appointment.”

The first month Sarah worked at U.C.L.A. Hospital, she felt compassion for the patient’s woes. Now that she’d been registering patients for two months, her patience was worn thin. Tonight, weary from class work and a test, she felt overburdened with

outside reading assignments and a term paper due by the end of the week. Her head ached. So did her neck, arched as it was in an awkward position, the phone cradled between her ear and shoulder to free her hands for filling out the questionnaire.

Sarah felt claustrophobic, trapped in a nine-by-twelve room that held four desks with four people concentrating on their own calls, while the supervisor walked by and hissed, "Hurry up. You've got a lot more calls to make." The supervisor was young enough to be Sarah's son, and he seemed to hiss at her more often than at anyone else. Now as he walked to her desk, shaking his finger in her face he announced, "After your shift, wait in the hall for me. I want to talk to you."

Sarah must have checked her Timex ten times in the final ten minutes. Time was like a rubber band; it stretched when you waited for something, and it shrank when you had a good time. Eight P.M. finally arrived. Sarah cleared her desk and waited in the hall for Mr. "Pain-in-the-neck." And she waited. At 8:15 her supervisor dashed up to her, waving papers clutched in his hand. "You screwed up your forms again. X is for Medicare. Y is for indigent. T is for Blue Cross, not the other way around. I don't think you're stupid," he said, as he thrust a loose-leaf notebook into Sarah's hand. "Take this home and study, or when your review comes up next month, I'll have to let you go."

Sarah could not afford to lose her job. Now she had to study her X Y Zs on top of everything else. The months were slipping by and she hadn't even begun to look for an apartment. Now when would she find the time?

Completely exhausted by the time she reached home, she nevertheless studied the hospital manual, cursing under her breath, "I hate forms! This system is impossible! B should stand for Blue Cross." The Xs looked like Ys to Sarah but she vowed she'd show that son-of-a-bitch supervisor.

As the weeks droned on, in addition to listening to patient complaints, Sarah checked each form three times to make certain she hadn't made a mistake. At the end of the third month, Mr. Wallace, the head of the department, called her into his office and with a smile he said, "I see that you have really improved, so you will become a

permanent employee. I knew you could do it. Some people just take longer than others before they catch on to the system. If you keep up your good work, when there's an opening, I'll move you up to a better slot. With your personality you'd do fine with the wealthy and the movie stars. They get sick, too, you know. Oh, and one other thing, Ms. Shallot. Now that you'll be a permanent employee, you'll be eligible for medical insurance. However, the policy won't cover you unless every statement on it is truthful. Is there anything on the form you'd like to change?"

Sarah stared at her hands, folded on her lap. With a look of embarrassment she said, "Well, ah, I'm really forty-five. I lied because I was afraid you wouldn't hire me if you knew the truth."

"Don't worry about it, Ms. Shallot," Mr. Wallace smiled. "Just fill out a new form and put your correct age on it. Actually, I thought you'd lied in the other direction and I couldn't understand why you'd make yourself older. You look much younger than forty-five; more like thirty-five."

As the weeks passed, Sarah learned the hard way that if she showed any interest or compassion, the patients would talk on and on and she'd fall behind her quota of calls. Now she hardened herself and cut them off if they gave her more information than she asked for. After four months on the job Sarah was shocked to hear herself say into the receiver, "Sorry, that's not my job." She hung up the phone and sat at her desk feeling stunned. She had become one of those officious bureaucrats she herself despised. She was becoming callous, and considered quitting before she stopped caring about people all together. But she couldn't afford to quit. Not yet.

Since her first week at work, Sarah's one pleasure was her fifteen-minute coffee break in the cafeteria. Each night she shared a table with five other members of the department. Everyone in the group attended college, including Sarah, but she was old enough to be their mother, and felt it. Nevertheless, she enjoyed the banter, and her self-deprecating humor brought laughs as she played to her student audience.

Deng, a young Chinese student from Hong Kong, had become Sarah's best buddy. It was he who found her missing files when the A B Cs were too much for her. And it was he who sat across from her each night in the cafeteria and laughed the loudest when she joked. One night she glanced past Deng's shoulder and watched a young man flirt with someone who was obviously sitting behind her. By the third night, when the man winked directly at her, Sarah could no longer ignore the stranger's flirtations.

On the fourth night, Sarah smiled back when the young man winked. The much-needed ego boost found her anticipating attention from the handsome young stranger across the room. She was flattered, but found it difficult to believe the six-footer in his mid-thirties with blonde hair falling over his high forehead actually considered her attractive.

Now each night she scanned the cafeteria as she entered, searching for her secret admirer, as she'd once scanned the high school cafeteria hoping the captain of the basketball team would acknowledge her presence with a wink and a hello. Work dragged and Sarah wondered, between calls and sometimes during the day, what had happened to Mr. Wonderful. She hadn't laid eyes on him in three whole days.

Another week passed without the young man's presence in the cafeteria and Sarah wondered if she had imagined the whole episode. Was she that desperate? On April Fool's Day, she came down with a heavy cold. When the infection reached her chest, she knew from experience that she had bronchitis. Sarah covered her mouth with her hankie and coughed into it again, and then reluctantly asked her crabby supervisor for the necessary slip to visit the staff doctor.

Mr. "Hurry up" handed the slip to Sarah and said, "Don't take any longer than necessary. You still have your quota of calls to finish." Sarah felt old, ugly, and sick, as she took the slip and headed for the elevator. She sat in the third-floor waiting room, blowing her nose and sniffing into her wet hankie.

"Miss Shallot, please come in. It is Miss, isn't it?" Sarah heard her name and looked up into the deep blue eyes of the man she'd searched for in the cafeteria. The

doctor's eyes skimmed his patient's petite body and slender legs. Sarah was grateful she'd worn a cotton skirt and not her usual blue jeans.

The doctor followed her into his office saying, "I'm Dr. Walbern," but Sarah didn't catch his name. He closed the door, looked over his patient with appreciation, and said, "I noticed you in the cafeteria and wondered what a nice-looking woman like you was doing in a place like this."

Sarah laughed on cue, and quipped, "Displaced royalty." Doctor and patient locked eyes as they smiled in recognition.

"Put on this white gown," the doctor ordered, "and leave the ties in back undone. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Sarah undressed, wondering why the doctor had told her to remove all her clothing when only her chest needed attention. She climbed up on the examining table and waited, her arms crossed tight over the white garb and her breasts. The doctor returned, opened the back of Sarah's hospital gown and placed his stethoscope against her back. The stethoscope felt cold, but the doctor's hand felt warm as he gently traced his fingers down the curve of her spine.

"Your skin's so soft," the doctor murmured. "You have a beautiful back." Sarah sat on the table shivering, uncertain whether her goose bumps were from the cold or the touch of this man's hands. She felt warm lips lightly touch her shoulder blade and wondered if she imagined it. She was grateful the doctor had removed his stethoscope. She was sure the pounding of her heart would break his ear drums.

The doctor moved to the front of the examining table, pulled the white cloth away from Sarah's neck and tucked the stethoscope in against her heart. She felt humiliated; now he would know how fast her heart was beating.

"Open your mouth and say, ahh," the doctor ordered, as he stuck the wooden tongue depressor in Sarah's mouth, removed it, and then bent low and looked into her eyes with a light stick that momentarily blinded her. Her gown dropped from her shoulders and the doctor touched her breast before she could reach to cover herself.

Sarah felt his open mouth and searching tongue on her lips and responded, out of habit, with passion.

They made love on the examining table. That is, Sarah thought they were making love. It was as if she were outside her own body, observing this awkward coupling. She barely felt the penis inside her, her body still unresponsive as the doctor murmured, “I’m finished.” He was back in his trousers and long white examining coat before she even sat up on the table. “Hurry,” he said, “get dressed.”

Sarah fumbled for her clothes, and in her haste her blouse dropped to the floor. The doctor hurried her again. “For God’s sake,” she snapped, “you make me feel like a call girl.” She picked up her blouse and slowly buttoned it, saying, “I’m moving as fast as I can.”

“Well, speed it up! I’ve got other patients,” the doctor snapped back, as he pushed a prescription into Sarah’s hand and ushered her toward the door.

At the door, Sarah hesitated, turned back to the doctor and asked, “When will I hear from you?”

The doctor looked at Sarah as if she’d taken leave of her senses.

Returning to her station, Sarah informed the supervisor: “I’m too ill to finish the night’s work.” He allowed her to leave, but warned, “You’ll have to work fast tomorrow to make up for tonight. You’re way behind on your quota.”

On the long drive home, Sarah coughed and hacked. Her nose dripped into her hankie along with her tears. How could she have allowed that stranger to fuck her on an examination table? She rolled the car window up and let out a long, shrill scream. Her mood matched the dark, muggy night as she reopened the window, hoping for a breeze.

Another secret. Sarah was too ashamed to confide in anyone—especially Gloria—who would judge her behavior. Her conscience might have been eased if she’d known Glo had slept with five men in three days. The seventies sexual revolution was swinging in L.A.

Friday, during her lunch break, Gloria called Sarah three times in an hour. Sarah couldn't get her off the phone no matter how many times she repeated, "I can't talk now or I'll be late for work."

At 3:00 P.M. Sarah stormed out of her apartment and slammed into her car muttering, "The nerve of her! Some friend. Why didn't I just tell her no!"

The car ran on automatic pilot; Sarah was fueled on anger. Glo had asked for permission to sleep with Jack. Not only that, she wanted to use Sarah's apartment for the assignation. "Blythe is in and out," she'd said, "and I wouldn't want her to catch us. You can come over to my house and play with her."

As far as Sarah was concerned, Gloria was out of her mind. "NO WAY BITCH!"

Sarah was so aggravated she missed her exit and arrived at work frustrated, late, and still angry. The fourth caller that abused her, swearing and cursing when she asked questions, got back what he gave as Sarah swore at him and slammed down the phone. An hour later she was in the supervisor's office. "I just received a call from the President of the Hospital Board. It seems you cursed and swore at one of the board members! What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Last month, you told me I didn't have to take abuse from patients. Four patients swore at me tonight. When the last one called me a 'two-bit whore,' I lost it."

Even the supervisor had to chuckle. "Okay," he said, "I'll let it pass this time. You had no way of knowing you were swearing at a board member. But, keep it cool from now on. I don't want to hear about any more calls like that."

On the drive home, Sarah felt better. She'd stood up to that abusive caller and stood her ground with the supervisor. Even her view of Gloria softened. After all, Glo probably thought she was acting like a friend asking for Sarah's permission, rather than sleeping with Jack behind her back. Sarah could rationalize anything.

At 9:30 P.M., Sarah dragged up the steps to her apartment and found Jack sprawled on the top step waiting for her. She knew instinctively that he'd come to discuss the Gloria business and she vowed she would not be the one who brought it up.

“I’m pooped,” she announced, as she led Jack into her apartment. “How about you pouring the wine? Thank God it’s Friday. I’m going to sleep ‘till noon tomorrow.”

Jack poured the wine and the friends caught up on the events of the last week. They talked about everything. Everything, except sex in the doctor’s office and Sarah’s calls from Gloria. Finally at midnight Sarah couldn’t keep her eyes open and in exasperation she stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room and blurted out, “Okay, I give. I’m tired of waiting for you to tell me about Gloria. She called. I know, and yes, you have my permission.”

“You mean Gloria called? She asked YOU for permission? God! I thought I might mention going to bed with her, but I sure as hell will not ask you for permission.”

“Then why the hell were you waiting on my doorstep tonight?”

“I missed you. You’re always working and we don’t see each other very often anymore. Oh, what the hell. I’m leaving,” Jack said and headed out the door.

On Saturday morning, Glo’s first call of the day awakened Sarah at 9:30 A.M. Gloria called again at noon and again at 1:30 P.M. Each time she called she asked another stupid question: “What should I wear when I meet Jack at his apartment? What’s his apartment like? What’s he like in bed?” Sarah was so pissed she wanted to scream.

At 6:00 P.M. the phone rang again and of course it was Gloria. “I’m leaving for Jack’s, and I wanted to know . . .”

“Gloria, for God’s sake, leave me alone. Go get fucked and get the hell off my phone!”

Sarah ate a lonely dinner in front of the TV and tried not to think about Jack holding Gloria in his arms as they danced to the stereo music. She washed two day’s accumulation of dishes and brooded about her two best friends sleeping together.

Sunday afternoon, Gloria reported in and when Sarah asked, “Did you do it in the living room and the bedroom?”

Gloria hesitated, then in a low voice she asked, “You mean Jack made love to you more than once?”

Sarah ignored the question but thought how sweet it would be to let Glo know how many, many times Jack had made love to her the first time she'd gone to his apartment. "Gloria, was the once good?" Sarah asked with a wry smile on her face.

"Oh, yes."

Sarah couldn't listen anymore and hurriedly said good-bye. She hung up, grabbed a zippered sweatshirt, slammed out the door, and clumped down the steps, determined to erase Gloria and Jack from her mind. She walked briskly to the front sidewalk, heard live music, and followed the sound to the backyard of the yellow-trimmed house across the street. She joined the standing crowd gathered to listen to some practicing musicians. No one in the crowd spoke to her, but they followed her lead when she clapped her hands in appreciation at the end of the set.

The crowd dispersed as the musicians put away their instruments. Sarah had no choice, she had to leave, but she left reluctantly. Slowly she walked back across the street to her apartment, feeling like a real Bohemian. Like those writer/artists who lived in Greenwich Village in the twenties. They'd listened to backyard musicians and slept around. Sarah wasn't the first woman who had multiple lovers after her divorce. Some artists even had lovers while they were married. So why should Sarah feel guilty?

CHAPTER 29

Crack! Bang! Boom! Startled awake by the uproar, Sarah trembled with fear. Thunder? Backfire? Gun shot? She listened to the repetitious whine of a police car as it sped past and, wide awake now, she sat upright in bed and groped in the dark for the lamp switch.

In the glow of the light bulb a spider raced across the wind-up clock and disappeared over the edge of the bedside table. Shuddering, Sarah checked the time, 3:30 A.M., and switched the lamp off. The room remained illuminated by the brilliance of the full moon flickering through the burlap-covered windows. Moon madness, she thought, as she slipped back beneath the top sheet and stared upward at moonlight tracing patterns on the ceiling.

Divorced for five months, Sarah still felt the loss of her husband. She knew she'd had good reasons for leaving Bob, but until the divorce she hadn't given up hope of a reconciliation. She missed being a wife.

Raised in the traditional society that dominated the thirties, forties, and fifties, Sarah had obeyed the dictum, "love, honor, and obey." Thirty years later, she met women of the seventies who took it for granted they had the right to pursue a career, and the right to indulge in unmarried sex. One woman, barely out of her teens, informed her, "No way would I obey a man. Maybe I'll never marry. If I decide I want a child, I'll consider marriage, but not until I'm thirty."

Another woman in her mid-twenties confided, "Men have been sexing around for centuries. It's about time women had the same pleasures." What really shocked Sarah was the "woman" of eighteen who said, "You don't have to be married to enjoy sex. From what I hear, married sex isn't all that great."

“What do you think promiscuity means?” Sarah had asked the teen-ager, who instantly replied, “When you can’t remember their names.”

Unable to quiet her mind, Sarah rearranged the bed covers again. She tossed back and forth, then in disgust, kicked the blanket and sheet off the bed. Still flat on her back, she slid her legs over the side of the low bed, which lacked a box spring to raise the mattress to regulation height. As her bare toes touched the cold wooden floor, she shouted, “Shit!” at the top of her lungs. The word hissed through her teeth like the snake at Eve’s feet. “Damn this insomnia!” Sarah was afraid she’d look her age if she didn’t get more sleep.

Sarah’s petite figure belied her forty-five years. She still drew whistles, at least until the construction workers saw her face. Sleepless nights and anxiety filled days were etching sorrow, rage, and resentment; distorting the refinement of her features.

Flopping out of bed, resigned to another sleepless night, Sarah toed barefoot toward the kitchen, her faded flannel nightgown hanging limp against her skinny legs. Tripping on the faded hem, Sarah stumbled in the dark, cursed, and groped for the light switch.

The kitchen light flicked on, briefly. In the sputter of light, a roach sped by as the light bulb exploded in a pop-flash and the lump in Sarah’s throat dissolved in tears. She couldn’t be free of roaches any more than she could be free of Bob. In the dark, she fingered her way across the stove top, punched on the light, and giggled as she walked to the refrigerator. The ancient fridge sounded to her like it was having sex. The old motor gurgled a beat and response, shuddered, and then stopped. Cold mechanical sex, Sarah thought, as she opened the door. Subdued light escaped and cast eerie shadows across the dimly lit room as she reached for the milk. Droplets of milk splashed from the carton, and her sob broke the silence as she kicked the fridge door shut with a bare foot and shuffled toward the stove with the milk carton grasped tightly in both hands.

Sarah added chocolate in a lump and stood hovered over the saucepan slowly stirring chocolate and milk. She poured the hot mixture into her favorite mug and grimaced as accumulated scum sloshed against the side. She felt like scum.

The sick, sweet smell of burnt sugar bit her nostrils and she thought of another odor she despised. The dead, stale smell of decaying beer. As a child, when she'd entered the DOG HOUSE with her father, that repugnant odor seemed to penetrate her eyes, her very soul. Even now, a whiff of beer or whiskey on anyone's breath made her queasy. To her, that aroma represented decadence, carnal knowledge, vice and hedonism.

Raising her mug to her lips, Sarah let out a yelp as the hot liquid scorched her tongue. "Damn it!" She hated this apartment; she hated San Pedro; it was as ugly as downtown Hammond in the Depression.

Sarah resented the fact that she'd once had it all and lost it: a man's love and her own home. Sarah had no doubt that Bob's sisters were still waiting on him hand and foot. Soon he'd remarry and have another damn fool to wait on him. She wondered again how she could have lived with Bob for more than half her life without understanding what made him tick. Had he always been as selfish, self-centered, and critical?

Spiritless, Sarah struck a match and lit a fat, half burned candle in a sauce dish. She carried the dish and her mug into the living room and sat down on an old-fashioned ice cream parlor chair, the swirl of metal felt cold against her back. She stared at her legs through the round glass-topped table and observed her bare feet propped up on the matching chair across from her; her feet and legs looked like they belonged to a stranger.

Sarah sighed, remembering that this antique set had once served Bart's customers. During Prohibition, Bart had turned his father's corner bar, where his mother had served free lunches, into an ice cream parlor. Sarah remembered roller skating across the brown and white checkerboard linoleum. She remembered the flypaper flapping in the breeze from the ceiling fan overhead.

* * *

Daddy propped Sarah up on the counter and let his daughter take a few sips of “bathtub beer,” she made a face at the “yucky” taste and only swallowed the liquid to make her father happy. Of course El scolded, “Stop giving her that!” To which Bart replied, “Keep out of this, Elizabeth. I know what I’m doing. Beer will put some fat on her bones. It’s good for her.”

* * *

Memories were Sarah’s last tie to her father. The metal spindle from Bart’s office, his bulldog tie, and the ice cream parlor set — and she’d had to plead for that — were her only material reminders. Sarah had called her mother and said, “I’m using a cardboard box for a table. If you still have one of Daddy’s ice cream parlor sets in storage, I’d really enjoy having it. I’ll pay to have it shipped.”

“You were only a baby when your father and I ran the ice cream parlor. How could you possibly remember? Okay,” Elizabeth said reluctantly, “I’ll arrange to have it sent after your check is in my hands. I’ll find out how much it costs and let you know.” In a weary voice, Elizabeth added, “You’ll find out how difficult it is to be responsible for yourself, just as I’ve had to since your father died. I’ve been alone for twenty-three years and you never helped me.”

“I can’t afford to stay on the phone, Mom. I know it will be a bother for you to ship the set, but I really would appreciate it. Thanks a lot. Hope you’re feeling better. Talk to you soon.”

Sarah continued to stare through the glass-topped table at the stranger’s bare legs. She felt like a puzzle with a missing piece. She still believed that a woman’s place was in the home, yet simultaneously she believed that a woman’s career was as important as a man’s. Long before women’s lib, Bart had encouraged Sarah to think for herself: “You can be anything you want when you grow up. Even President of the United States.” Today’s young women took their opportunities for granted. But Sarah was “allowed” the

luxury of a career only if the house was kept spotless, elaborate meals were placed on the table, she and the children well dressed, and her husband well satisfied.

A stomach cramp forced Sarah up from the chair and she glanced at the clock as she headed for the bathroom. It was 4:00 A.M. and she remembered other mornings, as a child, when she'd headed for the bathroom and collided with her father in the hall between their bedrooms.

* * *

Bart held his T-shirt under his balls with one hand while holding his other hand outstretched, palm forward, to ward off his nine-year-old daughter. His skinny legs running past Sarah as he shoved her aside to be first in the bathroom. "God damn it, Sarah, get out of my way." Indignation distorted his features to grotesque proportions as Sarah turned away from him saying, "Oh, Daddy, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Embarrassed at seeing her nearly nude father; she felt guilty because she needed to use the bathroom. Retreating back to her room she sat on the edge of her bed rocking back and forth with her arms crossed over her aching stomach. Her legs were crossed tight to hold back her "water" as she listened to her father wretch over the toilet behind the closed bathroom door.

When she finally heard her father return to his bedroom, Sarah tip-toed into the hall and quietly closed the bathroom door behind her. Her nose wrinkled in disgust at the odor of vomit and whiskey. Unable to distinguish one brand of alcohol from another, she'd recognized Bart's whiskeyed breath and it had sent shudders through her. Sarah sat doubled up on the toilet, feeling very alone.

Never before had Sarah witnessed her father drunk; no liquor was ever allowed in her mother's house. On occasion she'd overhear her father snarl, "El, you know damn well I can hold my liquor. You know I have to drink with my special customers until their money runs out. You complain about how I earn a living, how I make money, but you sure as hell know how to spend it! I have never lost control! I can hold my liquor." Bart's capacity for liquor was enormous. He could match any man drink for drink.

* * *

Sarah sat on the toilet, her stomach tortured with cramps, and remembered the retching sound of Bob gagging over the toilet when he, too, had too much to drink. Her father drank, her husband — ex-husband — drank, so why was she nauseated?

As her stomach pains subsided, Sarah remembered the numerous times Elizabeth had given her enemas and insisted that the red rubber enema bag, hanging from a hook on the closed bathroom door, had to be completely emptied. She remembered moaning in pain and pleading with her mother, “Stop, Mommy. Please, please stop. It hurrtrts. No more. Please, no more,” as she pulled the rubber-tipped nozzle from her rectum and anus and her mother immediately reinserted it with more pressure. Elizabeth would reinsert the tip, no matter how many times Sarah pulled it out.

Relieved at last, Sarah stood and used a half roll of toilet paper before she flushed. She washed her hands and plodded back into the living room, aware that her mother, her husband, her doctors and nurses had all mistreated both her body and her spirit. She slid back onto the metal chair and slumped over the table; her arms folded under her head. Her chest heaved and snot and tears dripped onto the glass. Sarah continued picking at the scabs of memory until she could bear self-pity no longer.

Abruptly, she sat upright and stopped her tears. She wiped her nose on her bare wrist, remembering she had done that as a little girl when she’d lived on a farm. What a disgusting habit, she thought, as she rose and walked to the kitchen to wash her arm. She wondered why she’d been thinking about that farm so much. Until recently, she hadn’t remembered anything but a farmer kicking her wooden blocks. But why had she collected farm implements? She’d lugged a blacksmith’s hoof scraper, a wooden mallet, a bale hook for hay, fence mending pliers, a butter churn, and a horse hair handled whip from Vanderville and left her furniture behind. Now those farm tools were gathering dust in her San Pedro studio.

In the kitchen, Sarah blew hard into a tissue, splashed cold water on her face, and dried off with a kitchen towel. She wet a dish cloth and carried it into the living room. Wiping tears and mucous off the table, she scolded herself. If Gloria could see her now, she'd be dressed down but good: "Knock it off, Sarah," Glo would command. "Stop the self-pity routine and get on with your life, already. No one wants to be around a loser. I'm glad I'm out from under that bastard I married. And you should be, too." What did Gloria know? She'd only been married for ten years.

Sarah rested her fingertips on her forehead and rubbed her temples with her thumbs as she slumped back on the chair; her head ached from soul searching. She knew she was intuitive and insightful, but being analytical about her own behavior was a new experience. She knew she had to face the reality of her divorce or starve. No way was she going to end up on a park bench with a newspaper over her face like the bag ladies she'd seen in Venice.

Near-death had changed the direction of Sarah's life. Divorce was the catalyst for more change. Long-repressed memories surfaced, demanding a new spirit of understanding. Sarah remembered the black-and-white childhood photographs her mother had mounted in scrap books. Picture after picture showed an eight-year-old Sarah smiling, holding out her skirt with both hands, bending one knee in a curtsy. Had Elizabeth seen one too many Shirley Temple movies? Or did she see herself as queen and her daughter as subject? Object. "Say thank you. Say you're welcome. Say please," Elizabeth ordered. "Be polite. Don't answer back a person in authority.

"If you're healthy, I'll be healthy," Elizabeth commanded. "Don't cry," she advised, "or I will." Sarah wondered if her mother knew where she ended and her daughter began.

Rules! Sarah was fed up to here with rules. She'd thought she'd escaped the prison of societal mandates when she stopped wearing a bra and a girdle. But rules still held her: "You should" was still her mother's password. Elizabeth's favorite "should" to

teen-age Sarah was, “You should always carry ‘mad money’ in case a boy gets fresh. That way you’ll always have money for the bus ride home.”

Sarah vowed that neither her mother nor society would continue to control what she should or should not do. If being good and behaving like a lady weren’t good enough to ensure her mother’s or a husband’s love, then by God, she’d be bad. She’d never tried *that*. In the seventies everyone’s behavior was up for grabs. It was catch as catch can! You just hoped you didn’t catch a social disease.

A faint smile tickled the corners of Sarah’s mouth as she remembered one of the few times she’d been “bad.” The night she threw all of Bob’s clothes down the steps. *That* night she’d lost control, and enjoyed it. Sarah’s smile of satisfaction gave a hint to her thoughts: Maybe she’d be better off if she were “bad” more often.

Sarah’s mood swings were fast and furious. One minute she felt strong and ready for anything, the next she blamed everything on herself or her circumstances. She lit a cigarette and blew smoke into the sun stream that filtered through the living room window. She had an overwhelming urge to scream and pound the table until the glass shattered, but she controlled herself. Sarah was finally free of Bob’s tantrums, and now she had to deal with her own. He wasn’t responsible for her happiness or her unhappiness. Sarah had carted her miseries like excess baggage no matter where she traveled.

Sarah wondered what sick enjoyment she found in feeling sorry for herself. Self-pity was familiar, an old friend that could be counted on for comfort. Cold comfort. Jack was right, she had to “sink or swim.” With a sardonic laugh, Sarah acknowledged that she’d have to learn from the backstroke while she swam forward in a crawl. For the first time in her life, she took responsibility for her fate. The role of “victim” was no longer palatable, or protective.

With insight, Sarah realized she’d overemphasized her ladylike demeanor to compensate for the way her father had died. She’d “acted” like a lady, hoping her

performance would win back the respectability she'd lost when Bart was brutally murdered.

The worst kind of embarrassment was public humiliation: the newspapers had written and rewritten the lurid details of the murder and the "alleged" accusations. People who knew Sarah, and people who had never met her made Bart's death the subject of tawdry gossip.

The discussion of the "details" didn't stop until the public had another headline to capture their attention. Now, after twenty-four years of denial, Sarah faced up to the truth. Her father had been murdered "by an unknown assailant or assailants."

She'd deluded herself thinking she was immune to the hateful things people said; that if she didn't acknowledge Bart's murder, others would stop discussing it. Safe from gossip! Fat chance. In the process of "alleging" this and "rumoring" that, the newspapers had destroyed Bart's reputation. The whole country knew; the wire services saw to that. There were no wars to report on September 15, 1951. If the *Chicago Daily News* hadn't run a featured series of articles on B-girls the week Bart was murdered, his death might have been back page copy, rather than front page headlines.

Sarah promised herself she'd ask Josh to return the envelope of newspaper clippings she'd sent him before she left Vanderville. She'd never understood his request. Intuitively, she knew she had to understand her own motives and behavior; her own pattern of dealing with stress. Tension crawled up her arms and neck as she shrugged her shoulder's and turned her neck from side to side.

Slightly more relaxed, she cradled her chin with her hand and thought of how many times Bart had repeated, "The only thing a man can be proud of is his good name and reputation. A man has to look himself in the mirror every day when he shaves. Never do anything, Sarah, that you can't take pride in."

Bart's good reputation had been destroyed. Historically, Sarah knew that when a man's father was unjustly accused, it was the obligation of his oldest son to restore his good name. Sarah, an only child, a daughter not a son, felt that same obligation to prove

her father's innocence. If not to the world, at least to herself. She knew in her heart Bart had never been a member of the syndicate.

Her elbow on the table, Sarah cupped her chin with her palm and identified with the sunlight streaming through the uncurtained window. A bit of light had penetrated her soul. Prepared now to return to bed, she glanced at the kitchen clock—5:00 A.M. She stared at slivers of sunlight flirting with the stacked canned goods on the open shelf above the stove, the labels clearly visible in the sunlight. Labels, she thought: good-bad, sweet-sour, lady-tramp. Once a label is torn from a can, it has no meaning. Sarah had labeled herself, “Lady-of-the-Manor.” Now she was labeled a “divorcee,” whether she liked it or not. Sarah had hated the label “separated,” but “divorced” was obscene.

CHAPTER 30

Circumstance had peeled away another layer of Sarah's denial, but Bart's death and his life had marked her permanently. Sarah was ashamed of being the daughter of a tavern owner.

She stared out the kitchen window at the palm fronds swaying in the breeze and tried convincing herself that she had nothing to be ashamed of; certainly not the fact that Bart owned taverns. He'd hired B-girls, so what! The word B-girl made Sarah's skin crawl and shame covered her, once again, like a shroud of self-rejection.

B-girls. Bar girls: blowzy, faded rejects from a society they'd rejected. B-girls. Hustlers. Outsiders. Prostitutes, pimps. Con-artists. Artists. Outcasts. Society lumped them all together; anyone different was suspect. Artists were freaks, Sarah conceded that. When she attended L.A. art openings, she saw artists wearing bizarre costumes. One pale, fey male artist always wore the same thread-bare black jacket with a safety pin dangling from one sleeve. The pin didn't pin anything, it just hung. The pin was his emblem. What should Sarah's symbol be?

Still in the kitchen at 5:30, she rose from her chair and walked into the bathroom to brush her teeth. She stood there, staring into the medicine cabinet mirror, observing her face with disgust. Bitterness was written across her features and it aged her. Moving her face an inch from the mirror, she investigated a small cyst on her cheek. No matter how many times a doctor removed it, the cyst always returned. With art, Sarah turned ugliness into beauty; why not do the same with this blemish? Reaching into her makeup basket on the toilet tank, Sarah removed dark brown liquid eyeliner and dotted it over the cyst. Now she had an identifying beauty mark. She was an artist; now she looked like one, at least to herself. No longer an outcast, but an artist among artists.

Sarah had determined, at the age of eight, that when she grew up she wanted to be an artist. She'd sat on the grass in San Diego's Balboa Park and under the guidance of an instructor from the local YWCA, she'd watercolored her first painting; a palm tree. Sarah participated in other Y activities. She starred in a production of the Mikado. She played the role of the martyred wife who flung her body on top of her dead husband, ready to be buried alive. How symbolic. After Sarah's theatrical debut, she considered acting as a career, but that daydream was short-lived; she enjoyed painting and drawing far more than being on stage.

Baby-sitters were unheard of in the thirties, but Elizabeth was resourceful when she wanted time for herself. The YWCA kept Sarah busy during the week, and on Saturdays Elizabeth would drop her off at a meeting of the Seventh Day Adventists, leaving before the preacher gathered the children around him in a circle at his feet. He'd preach at them about good and evil and the love of Jesus, while the kids fidgeted, cracked their gum or picked their noses. Sarah, the quiet one in the noisy group, waited for the "talk" to end, anticipating the children being piled into the pick-up truck after the sermon. She enjoyed the outings: picnics in the park or visits to historical monuments. She looked forward to those Saturday adventures, despite the preacher's blabber. No wonder Sarah was confused about her religious identity. Elizabeth forgot she was a Jew when it suited her.

Sarah stared at her new beauty mark in the mirror, wondering if she'd chosen art as a career because her mother had encouraged her artistic bent when she was a child. Many times Elizabeth had told Sarah in a hushed voice, "Your *real* grandmother, not Grandma Etta, was an artist. She studied art in Paris, France." With reverence Elizabeth would add, "You know my mother died when I was ten years old. You're ten now and you're very lucky to have a mommy."

These days Elizabeth reminded Sarah repeatedly, "I told you to take shorthand in high school. You could get a good-paying secretarial job now, if you had that skill. I

did, and it served me well. Why won't you ever take my advice? It's for your own good. Even when I'm a hundred and you're eighty, you'll still be my child and I can tell you what to do."

Nag, nag, nag. Elizabeth had nagged Sarah all her life. "Do it my way." Or else.

Sarah walked to the kitchen for a glass of water and looked at the brown stained mug in the sink. She filled it with water but the dark stain remained at the bottom. Sarah felt stained with guilt, she carried it like a baby's security blanket. She'd tried to be a good daughter, wife, and mother. She'd placated and appeased and what a price she'd paid; one physical ailment after another. Now she wanted to please herself, but was baffled at the prospect. For the last year she'd mimicked her father's behavior — cursing and swearing, sleeping around — but she hated betraying her value system. Promiscuous was a far worse label than divorcee, and she knew it.

Hauling herself into the bedroom, Sarah picked up the sheet and blanket from the floor and crawled back into bed, grateful it was Sunday and she could sleep as late as she wanted. She covered her face with the top sheet to block out the sunlight and slept until noon.

Sarah might have slept away the entire day if the phone hadn't awakened her. Bleary-eyed, she stumbled to the phone and croaked into the receiver, "Sorry, you have the wrong number." Then she wondered why she'd bothered to answer the phone at all.

On the way back to bed, she grabbed a yellow-lined legal pad and a ball-point pen from her desk. She spent the rest of the afternoon writing pages and pages about her father's lifestyle.

Bart Mindel loved to travel. He traveled away from his wife and daughter whenever he could, and he traveled with them whenever he wanted. Bart worked long hours, no doubt about that. He said he worked for his wife and daughter, but Bart worked for himself because he craved applause. He was no longer stuck behind the bar in shirt sleeves, the sleeves held up by garters to keep the cuffs out of water. Now Bart wore a

pin-striped suit and owned a string of taverns with names like the Flamingo Lounge and King Tut's Hut, each decorated garishly by Bart himself.

He made the rounds of his "night spots" every morning and every evening, but he always started and finished with his favorite, his first success, BART'S DOG HOUSE. The other tavern owners had scoffed; they were certain no one would frequent an old house at the edge of town. But Bart knew better. "It's on a corner," he confided to Elizabeth. "I'll get traffic from two directions. My father's tavern was on a corner, and he always said a corner's worth double in income. I've ordered a neon sign for out front. It will be the first one in Cal City. BART'S DOG HOUSE won't be overlooked."

Bart was right. That flashing neon sign helped, but it was Bart himself who produced success as a theatrical producer. Bart loved his version of show-biz. He was a salesman, too. He sold himself night and day, with his smile, his story, and his song. He pleased for the almighty buck and exuded excitement as he moved, gestured, and posed behind the bar. Always dramatic and gregarious, Bart corked his sensitivity and popped in adolescent rage at anyone who crossed him. His magnetic personality drew customers, and the cash register drew him.

Bart parked his late-model black Cadillac a block from the DOG HOUSE. He wouldn't risk a scratched fender if some drunk veered away from the curb. Besides, he liked the short walk to the corner. He needed time to gather his enthusiasm before he hit the front door like a bolt of lightning.

He walked fast, with a jaunty step, and viewed the shabby neighborhood. Mrs. Poplowski leaned against her front door and fanned her face with a newspaper, "Hiya, Mr. Mindel," she hollered, "hot night, even for August." She waved her paper at Bart and he waved back, tipping his hat. He kicked a rag from the sidewalk onto the grass, then changed his mind and retrieved it, dusted off the toes of his shined black shoes, and returned it to the grass as he made a mental note to keep an eye on one of his girls. Ginger hadn't been up to snuff lately. Maybe he should send her to a doctor. Maybe her bloated face wasn't just from booze.

As Bart approached the corner, the jukebox blared out the open door of the tavern. Syncopated music beat a rhythm past the neon sign above his head. Red light waves floated in the twilight sky, and Bart grinned at his name in lights; to him the neon sign looked like a theater marquee.

“Jukebox Saturday Night,” one of the twenty-four selections on the walnut, red plastic, and chrome Wurlitzer “rented” from the local Mafia, blasted as Bart walked into his establishment. He liked the commotion; the jukebox in play meant a percentage of the take when someone pressed the button selector firmly and deposited a nickel, a dime, or five plays for a quarter. If the “Dick Smidts,” who nursed one beer all night, were too tight to spend a nickel for a tune, Bart had a slug handy behind the bar, to keep the pandemonium at its peak.

Only one man sat at the bar, Bart knew his regulars would show, it was only 7 o’clock, and his special customers arrived late. They stayed late, too, in the back room, after Bart locked the front door at 3:00 A.M. The official closing time was overlooked by the cops, who Bart paid off weekly. For the same price, the cops phoned ahead if a raid were planned.

Bart lingered at the doorway for a moment to count the crowd, register how many B-girls were on duty, and take note of two more customers he’d overlooked before his eyes had adjusted to the dimly-lit tavern. He hoped Judge Sullivan would show tonight as promised. The judge always consumed a load, and dropped cash like it was monopoly money.

Bart stepped briskly behind the oak bar, removed his fedora, and handed it to Gus, the bartender. Then he checked the register and counted the twenties that were hidden under the top compartment.

“Hey, Bart, gimme a beer,” the redneck customer grinned as he slammed his dollar down on the polished bar.

Bart turned from the cash register, his smile pasted at the ready and asked, “What’ll you have?”

“Gimme an Old Milwaukee, Bart.”

How Bart hated “Dick Smidts.” Those bastards nursed one beer all night and called him by his first name like they were equals.

Bart’s eyes darted around the room as he held the beer stein under the draft spigot. White foam oozed and spilled over the side to the slatted duct-board floor before he shut off the lever above it. He shoved the brew toward his customer, and with one smooth motion, grabbed a damp rag from beneath the counter, wiped foam from the polished bar, and asked, “Howya been, Stan?” The customer’s name finally came to Bart from the storehouse of his incredible memory.

“Shit!” Stan belched. “Terrible. My old lady’s such a pain in the ass, I’ve been sticking it to her for a couple of days just to get her off my back.” Stan laughed and raised the beer to his mouth. “That’s how you’re doing it now,” Bart threw back and they both laughed.

Bars come in flavors like ice cream and BART’S DOG HOUSE was spumoni. The tavern served all kinds of liquor to all kinds of customers, from rednecks to doctors and lawyers. Bart didn’t have to ask the professional men what they wanted to drink. He’d lean across the bar, look into the eyes of his special customers, and say, “Your regular tonight, Doctor? Grand Marnier?”

The tavern began to fill, and the customers kept Bart and Gus hopping behind the bar. Words drifted across the room. “I faced a lonely future without my man,” whined the lone woman at the far end of the bar.

“She won’t be lonely for long,” Bart remarked to Gus. “She’s looking for action.”

“She’s so hungry she wouldn’t even make a good B-girl,” Gus chuckled.

They both knew the type. Over-age and over-dressed, mottled skin visible beneath her heavy makeup. Her eyes had the haunted look of a steady drinker.

The joint was jammed, smoke rose in ribbons, the ping of the slot machine collided and merged with the slam of the register drawer and the clink of glass. Dirty

glasses soaked in the sink beneath the bar and soap bubbles popped as Chartreuse sidled up to a stranger at the bar, the bubbles clearer than the B-girl's pancaked face. "Howya doin, Honey?" Chartreuse asked, as the truck driver eyed her low-cut red crepe dress that clung to every inch of her slender body. Her fingers curled around the dollar bills folded over her forefinger, pinned by her thumb, but she touched the customer's thigh lightly with her free hand, as if by accident, and whispered in his ear, "Wanna buy me a drink, sweetie?"

Bart watched the ploy. Good girl, he thought, if she gets one nickel out of that tight-ass, after closing time I'll give her a real drink.

The trucker eyed Chartreuse's cleavage and said, "Sure, baby, why not. What'll you have?" and gave no thought to the dollar he'd pay for the B-girl's watered-down creme-de-menthe. No matter how little liquor remained in the bottle, watered or not it still smelled like creme-de-menthe.

Bart watched the trucker's eyes as he handed Chartreuse her drink. That bastard's thinking, "Oh, those boobs, those mother-fuckin' tits. How I'd like to bite the tips right off." Bart laughed to himself.

Bart didn't miss a thing. Chartreuse would probably turn a trick or two before the night was over. She probably made more on her sideline than he paid her. He was sure he could retire on a percentage of the B-girl's tricks, but Bart would never, ever take a dime from any woman. What those girls did on their own time was their business.

Bart was alert to all the action in the stuffy bar; his eyes might be directed to the customer in front of him, but he eye-balled the coins dropped in the registers from the corners, and made a calculated estimate of the night's take. His face concealed his thoughts, while his knowing, street-wise eyes surveyed his domain.

Bart admired the decor he'd so carefully chosen. The painted murals of scotties, schnauzers, greyhounds, and bull dogs painted in sleazy poster colors on the back walls. A pink stuffed poodle hung over the bar and a straw-man on horseback swung from a bead rope attached to the brass light fixture in the ceiling. Liquor bottles were lined up

like soldiers on glass shelves behind the bar; a sign above them announced beers on tap. The first dollar Bart ever earned was framed and prominently displayed and so was his framed liquor license. Red leather-topped stools circled the curved oak bar, a rung on their bottoms for the feet of friend or stranger.

Bart surveyed his kingdom with experienced eyes. He watched Gus return from his second trip to the john in ten minutes. He's up to something, he thought. I'd better have a talk with him tomorrow. He watched Gus wrap a clean, white linen towel around the stem of a glass and talk to a customer while he stuffed the other end inside the glass and swished it back and forth until the glass sparkled.

Christmas lights permanently tacked to the ceiling twinkled as men leaned and posed, their bodies casting erratic shadows in the darkened room. Bart smiled at Kathleen, Nora, and Dagmar. Those girls knew how to get a buck out of a horny man. Bart's smile beamed approval, while his eyes read, "One false move girls, and you're fired." He missed Madeline sharing the duties behind the bar, but he'd moved her to manage King Tut's. He'd taught her enough about his business to know she'd have good receipts to show him tomorrow.

Bart removed a fresh Havana from his breast pocket and bit off the end. He took the end and a fleck of tobacco off his tongue with his forefinger and dropped the debris into the overflowing ashtray filled with butts, folded match books, dried, curled lemon peel, and toothpicks. Sulfur from the match Bart struck bit his nostrils. "Shit!" he muttered, and then snapped, "Ginger," pinching her arm as she walked near him. "Get off your ass and empty these God damn ashtrays."

Bart rolled his cigar back and forth between his petulant lips. He clamped his mouth tight over the stogie until the lip-end of the cigar grew moist and soggy, and the ash at the other end grew long and wide. Bart never actually smoked his cigar; he used it as a pacifier and an extension of his pointing finger.

Bart's vitality carried the evening: his energy and exuberance were as infectious as his hearty laugh. His velocity turned to high when he had an audience. When Bart

told a story, every head in the room turned in his direction. His stories were exaggerations of events in his personal life, he never told a “dirty joke” or repeated one he’d heard. “When I was a kid,” Bart started, his voice loud enough to be heard in the balcony, if the bar had had one, “my father pulled a fast one.” Bart chuckled with his memory, “He told me to collect a cigar-box full of flies, and he’d pay me a dollar a pound.” Bart smacked Ginger’s ass as she wiggled by and said, “He liked a clean tavern, too.

“Well,” Bart continued, “it took me a week, but I collected a cigar-box full of flies. You know how much a fly weighs?” Bart chuckled, “Not much, believe me. I made ten cents on that transaction. That’s why I’ve been wise to *you* guys ever since!” Bart spread his arms to encompass the entire room. His stories might be minor, but his gestures were major. His facial expressions matched his mouth; both moved in unison, his timing on target — pausing for the laugh between lines as he entertained.

“Hey Bart, how ‘bout a song?” someone yelled. This was quickly followed by the crowd echoing, “Yeah, Bart, sing *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.” The foot stomping, whistling, and shouts gave Bart the same thrill he’d experienced as a ten-year-old boy when he’d won first prize in the song and dance contest at the old Bijou Theater in Hammond, Indiana.

“Sure, why not,” Bart grinned and pulled out a footstool he kept behind the bar for such occasions. “Gus, go tinkle the piano for me,” Bart said, as he stepped up on the stool, cleared his throat, and held his hand daintily in front of his mouth. Then with arms outstretched and mouth opened wide, Bart blasted his theme song:

I SAID, a good man, a GOOD man is hard to find.

You’ll always get the other kind.

Just when you think that he is your pal,

You look around and find him foolin’ some other gal.

Clinking glasses stilled while Bart sang. Even the drunks stopped slurping and lowered their glasses to the bar.

Then you RAVE.

Ohhh--how you CRAVE

To see HIM lying in his grave.

Bart wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and had the cloth back in his pocket without missing a beat.

So if YOURRR man is right,

Take my adddvice

And HUUUG him in the morning,

KIISSS him in the night,

Give him plenty lovin', HONEY

Treat him RIIIGHT.

Bart's arms reached out above his head, his fingers widespread, his heart and soul in every word; the timber of his voice, bass and distinctly his, belted out the finale.

CAUUUSSS a GOOD MAN (I said, a GOOD MAN!)

Nowadaysss is harrrd to FINNND.

Bart brought the house down, again. Applause, thigh slapping, hoots and whoops of appreciation, and foot stomping combined with shouts, "Yeah, Bart!" "Sing it again!" From the back of the room a fan shouted, "C'mon over here, Bart, and let me buy you a drink."

"And one for the piano player, too!" Bart yelled back with a laugh. Might as well make a profit on two drinks, instead of one.

Back behind the bar, Bart whispered to Gus, “My life-time-batting-average for a ‘Good Man’ must be around seven hundred!” A good man *is* hard to find, and a hard man is good to find, too. At least that’s what he’d tell El when he dropped in bed beside her and nudged her awake. Not that it did him much good.

Bart, deflated for a second, puffed up on his next thought. Life was good, and getting better. He had that crowd eating out of his hand. He always did. The best men in town sought him out, wanted to hear him sing — the doctors, the lawyers. Bart might be a short little pisser, but he could piss farther than any other boy in eighth grade.

Bart glanced at his watch, only another hour until closing time. He reached into his pants-pocket for his wrinkled handkerchief, coughed, and then blew, like a fog-horn, into the cloth. He longed to be anywhere but the DOG HOUSE, singing his throat dry for a bunch of drunks. The smoke, the odor of beer, whiskey, sweat, and cheap perfume blended into a noxious mixture that polluted the air. If the wind blew in the right direction, windows as far away as Hammond and Calumet City had a dark film of soot from the belching smoke stacks of the East and South Chicago mills. Bart swore the steel workers brought the stench of the mill in with them. As far as Bart was concerned, those bigoted steel workers poisoned the air in the DOG HOUSE. He belched and farted in public, like they did, but he was no bigot. Bart treated his black janitor with as much respect as he treated the rest of his employees.

Bart was elected president of the Tavern-Owners Association for two years running, and he got a bigger kick out of *that* than the fact that he owned the mayor and the police department. He resented paying off the cops every week with brown paper bags full of fives and tens. He’d earned the money with the sweat of his brow, why the hell should he have to share it with them? He’d curse under his breath as he handed over the “pay off.” He’d been paying off those bastards for as long as he could remember.

Back in the Depression, when Bart owned an ice cream parlor, he’d paid off in free sandwiches; now he paid off with cash. What really pissed him off was “renting” Mafia jukeboxes. He’d owned his own jukeboxes, why the hell should he have to rent them

from the mob? “Those bastards didn’t even know Cal City existed before the war,” Bart steamed. Now that money was flowing, they muscled in and wanted part of the action. Bars, like amusement parks, had a façade of tinsel and glamour, but beneath the make-believe, it was all decadence and decay.

After closing, Bart was home and standing at his bedroom bureau; the silver-framed picture of Elizabeth’s natural mother was clearly visible under the lamp El kept lit for him. A white linen towel crossed the top of the pleated shade to dim the light so she could sleep.

Bart peeled off the sterling-silver wristband of his watch. The diamond-studded numbers read 4:35 A.M. He pulled off his diamond pinkie ring and placed it near his watch. Then he emptied his pockets of coins and a fat bankroll of fives, tens, and twenties. He removed the silver money clip and counted the bills—\$1,800.

Not too bad for a Monday night. He thought he’d be stuck with cheapskates all night, but thank God Judge Sullivan showed. Don spent a bundle just to hear Bart sing “*Who’s Sorry Now*.” He parted with his hidden C-note after that.

Bart removed his comb, gold filled pen and pencil, cigars, and his wrinkled and pleated handkerchiefs. He lined them neatly on the bureau top, pulled the light-chain and, in the dark, dropped his pants, shirt, and jockey shorts to the floor and climbed into bed nude except for his bleached white T-shirt.

Exhausted, Bart’s body sank into the mattress. He threw a bare leg across El’s ass and she moaned. He removed his leg. Bart was proud of the lady he called his wife. She was beautiful, with good breasts and legs to match. He claimed women either had good legs or good boobs, rarely both. When he wanted to get a rise out of Elizabeth, he’d tell her that’s why he’d married her.

Bart appreciated his wife’s refinement. He thought she was a classy dame, maybe too classy for him. It pissed him off when she turned up her nose at his friends, but she hung on his every word, laughed at his same old stories, and waited on him hand and foot. El could set a good table, too. What more could a man ask? Most mornings when

he arrived home, she'd struggle out of bed and fix him bacon and eggs. This morning she'd slept through his home-coming. She must really be pooped, he thought. She sure keeps herself busy with her lady's club, PTA, weekly Mah Jong, shopping — always shopping, while the maid cleans the house. She lives the life of Riley. Well, a lady shouldn't have to work, and Elizabeth's a lady. She never farted. She never belched. She wiped her nose daintily, but never blew it. She kept her legs crossed at the ankle and her eyes on the carpet.

Bart was crude enough for both of them. El would pretend she didn't get a kick out of his stories. "Oh, Bart," she'd say, "why do you talk like that, and in front of Sarah?" But she'd always break down and laugh as hard as anyone.

Bart was the realist, Elizabeth the idealist; both perfectionists. Elizabeth's relatives might think they were too good for Bart but they, too, laughed at his stories. They didn't see his essence, but Elizabeth did. That's what counted. Bart might appear vulgar and crude to others, but it was his business that made him appear unsavory. His wavy black hair had disappeared in his late twenties, but bald or not, Bart remained vital, sexy. Full of energy, he had found the nearest thing to his dream of show-business in his taverns and nightclubs.

Bart cradled his arms behind his head and pushed into the pillow. Elizabeth groaned in her sleep but he ignored her. He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, and replaced his palm under his head. He'd made a good move, relocating from Hammond to Cal City. The Hammond bars had to close at 2:00 A.M. and then the boozers crossed the state line to Bart's joints. He was doing all right for "Pussy," the baby of the family. God, how embarrassed he'd be when his mother called out from the upstairs window, "Pussy, Pusala, come home." Bart had plenty of fist fights over that. How he wished his mother were still alive. Now he could afford to buy her that washing machine he'd always promised.

Bart was doing all right. Not as well as his father, but "plenty good." Pa had owned a whole city block until the Depression. Losing half his property was what really

killed Bart's father, but Bart was still young. He had plenty of years of earning power, and he could end up a very rich man. Young, thank God. Too young for the first World War, and too old for the second. World War II was good for business. Naval officers from the Great Lakes traveled miles to Cal City just to hear Bart sing.

Pa would have been proud — he'd taught his son the business. Just last week Bart had driven past the old building, and what a kick to see his father's name, MAX MINDEL—1898, in granite letters six feet high.

Bart pressed deeper into the mattress and thought about the old neighborhood and the solid brick, block-long building that had once housed his father's corner tavern, a dance hall, a butcher shop, a fire station and all those rented apartments on the second floor. How the hell did Pa earn enough, with those locals he catered to? He'd built his brick empire. It must have been Ma's cooking. Bart chuckled to himself, remembering the Russian-style Irish corned beef and cabbage his mother cooked and served for the free lunch downstairs and for her growing family upstairs. Bart wished his parents were still alive to see his beautiful house. He paid cash for it, too, no mortgage for him. But damn it, keeping up the house cost a lot of money. And the dram-shop insurance just kept going up. If those drunks wouldn't drive when they're drinking, he wouldn't have to pay so damn much for insurance. Why the insurance companies blamed the place that served the last drink before the accident, Bart never understood.

He had to tell El to cut down. What the hell, did she think he was made of money? He had a big nut to crack every week. Who did she think paid all those bartenders, B-girls, janitors, and pay-offs? What a way to earn a living. Bart wondered what would have happened if his folks had let him travel with that vaudeville troupe. After Bart won that song and dance contest, the manager asked him to join the tour, but his folks put the kibosh on that. Hell, if he'd become a child-star, singing and dancing, he might have become a movie star as an adult rather than wasting his talent on a bunch of drunks.

Bart sighed over his lost opportunity, turned over on his side, one elbow poking El, and she groaned in her sleep.

“Damn this bed feels good,” Bart thought as he rolled over and said his prayers. He thanked God that business was good and that Elizabeth was in the mood at least once this week. He prayed that Sarah wouldn’t wake him with her crying. That kid cried more than anyone else, including his sister Mae.

Bart loved Sarah, she was his, but damn it, he’d wanted a son to carry on his good name and reputation. He’d worked hard to establish himself in business, but he had no son to inherit it. All Elizabeth ever talked about was, “Our daughter goes to college. I wanted to, but my father said only the boys could go, not the girls. My brothers weren’t interested, and I was never given the chance.”

At 4:00 P.M. Sarah dotted the last “i,” crossed the last “t,” and drew a zigzagged black line at the bottom of the last page of her Bart story. She clenched and unclenched her fists and wiggled her fingers, which were stiff from writing.

Sarah rescued the pages spread about her bed. She was surprised that she’d known so much about her father’s lifestyle and the tavern business. She’d written more pages at one sitting than ever before. All she’d done this day was nibble on cheese and crackers, pee, and write, yet she felt like she’d accomplished something. She felt more satisfaction after writing twenty pages than she’d ever felt after completing an art project.

Tired but pleased, she struggled out of bed, shoved the hand-written pages into a file folder, and labeled it WRITING. She jammed it in the file drawer of her desk between a file marked GALLERY DEALERS and another marked CURATORS. She paused for a moment, then rearranged the files so that the WRITING file was in front.

At 8:00 P.M., Sarah crept back into bed, the exhilaration and distraction of writing had vanished and, once again, she turned her face to the wall.

CHAPTER 31

The atmosphere of the laundromat was hot and sticky. Steaming, even for the end of May. Sarah stuffed wet clothes into a dryer and jammed a quarter into the steel slot before retreating outside with a book tucked under her arm. She lowered herself to the sidewalk, leaned her back against the smudged window, and glared at the debris littering the sidewalk and gutter. Her attention shifted when she heard loud voices and looked up to see two men arguing at the corner. Their strident voices grew louder as they edged closer to where she sat. One wore a suit and steel-framed glasses, the other was bare-chested with colored beads jiggling around his neck.

The older man, wearing glasses, backed closer to Sarah shouting obscenities as the young man in beads moved menacingly toward him screaming, “*Shut your face old man!*” The suited gentleman responded by pummeling the beaded one with his fists and the youth backed away, one arm bent at the elbow to shield his eyes, his other hand in front of him to fend off the blows.

Sarah sat mesmerized, watching the fight from her perch on the sidewalk. In the ghetto they fight in the street, she thought, in Vanderville the shouting’s confined to the house. Now the two antagonists were directly in front of her as an animal howl erupted from the bare-chested youth. “*Stop! Stop it!*” he shouted while shoving the older man violently and smacking him across the face with the flat of his hand. The steel-framed glasses dug into the suited man’s face, fell, and smashed on the sidewalk. Blood covered the old man’s cheek and dribbled toward his mouth as he cursed, “*You rotten son-of-a-bitch! I’ll kill you! You no good bum!*”

Sarah looked at the shattered glasses on the sidewalk and then up at the men. She’d warned the twins, “We see so much violence on TV, we might become immune to it.” Aware then that she couldn’t just sit there watching, Sarah leaped to her feet. She

bolted into the *Ma and Pa* grocery store next to the laundromat shouting, “You’ve got to do something!” and pointed toward the open door. “There are two men fighting out there. Do something!”

The storekeeper remained calm and passive. He smiled and said, “Oh, that. That’s nothing. It’s just Jose and his son. Alonzo tried to hold me up yesterday — he had a gun — so I called his father. That’s what they’re fighting about. If I call the police, it will just make matters worse. They fight all the time. Don’t worry about it.”

Don’t worry about it? Sarah moaned to herself as she exited the store. Has the world gone completely mad? Outside, the two men were nowhere in sight; only a spot of bright red blood and the smashed glasses on the sidewalk convinced Sarah she hadn’t imagined the whole ugly business. Conscious of her fear and the heat of the morning, Sarah bent to pick up the book she’d dropped on the pavement and then resumed her position on the sidewalk. She leaned her head back against the filthy window, then sat upright immediately. Good God! She’d have to wash her hair when she got home. Some Lady-of-the-Manor! Today Sarah had hit a new low. What was she doing living in a ghetto? It was high time she looked for an apartment in the city.

A tall, muscular man walked toward the laundromat; Sarah admired the snow white T-shirt that hugged his massive shoulders. His spotless trousers clung tight to his thighs and the stranger’s appearance pleased Sarah’s sense of proportion, her artist’s eye. The young man entered the laundromat and Sarah followed him in, sure her clothes must be dry by now.

Her dryer had stopped spinning and she dug inside the tumbler. A metal zipper burned her finger and she flinched muttering “Shit!” under her breath as she sucked on her finger of pain.

“Is anything wrong, Miss?” someone behind her asked. She turned toward the questioner and stared up into the refined face of the man in the spotless T-shirt. He looked so out of place in the begrimed laundromat that Sarah’s eyes lingered on him. He looked like a brown version of Bob, only his proportions were exaggerated. Her stomach

churned, *danger*, but Sarah ignored the warning, unaware that her eyes fluttered as she patted her hair and licked her lower lip with her tongue.

She smiled up at the stranger and said, “Thanks for asking, but it’s nothing. Just this damn heat.” The young man chuckled with an appealing grin, as if she’d said something witty. Sarah liked his smile even more than Bob’s; his white teeth sparkled against his milk-chocolate skin.

Turning back to the dryer, Sarah felt the man’s eyes as she stooped to retrieve a blouse that had slipped from the edge of the dryer to the grimy floor. Standing, she folded the blouse and watched the stranger as he emptied his dryer, admiring his well-formed shoulders and back. She pulled a sheet from the dryer and struggled to fold it. The stranger grabbed two ends and together they folded the sheet into a neat square. She returned the favor and together they folded his sheets as well as hers. Tucking his laundry into a duffel bag, he asked, “What are you doing in a neighborhood like this?”

“I was just about to ask you the same thing,” Sarah laughed as she stuffed her laundry into a red plastic basket.

The stranger’s teeth sparkled whiter than his T-shirt as he said, “I’m an artist. I have to live in the low-rent district.”

Sarah smiled up at him in recognition and felt she had known him all of her life. She longed to rest her head on his broad chest and feel safe in his arms.

“Can I buy you a coke?” Mr. Clean-cut asked.

“Yes, thanks, but could we drink it outside? It’s so ghastly in here.”

Mr. Gallant carried Sarah’s clothes basket to her car and placed it in the trunk, then returned to the laundromat for canned Cokes. Minutes later he handed one to Sarah and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Sarah. What’s yours?”

“Ralph. Ralph Taylor. Are you interested in art, Sarah?”

“More than interested, Ralph. I’m an artist, too.”

“A student of art, or an artist?”

“Both. I’m a professional artist and still a college student.” Sarah sipped her drink and smiled up at Ralph as she asked, “How about you? Are you an artist or a student of art?”

“I’m a full-time student. I haven’t entered any shows. Yet. But I’m good!” Sarah admired Ralph’s confidence and wished she had half as much.

“I’m an older student. I spent time in Vietnam.”

Older student? Sarah chuckled to herself, then felt shocked as she realized they were not contemporaries. Sarah looked Ralph over more closely and realized he must be in his late twenties, and that she was probably old enough to be *his* mother, too.

Interrupting her thoughts, Ralph asked, “Are you into black men?”

“Huh? Pardon me? I don’t understand.”

“You know, some white women feel guilty about slavery and want to befriend a black.”

Sarah laughed and said, “No. I’m not into black men, or women either. I do feel comfortable with black people, if that’s what you mean.”

“Never mind, you’ve answered my question.” Ralph handed Sarah a pocket-sized tablet and a ball-point pen. “May I have your phone number?” he asked.

Sarah laid the tablet on the car fender and wrote her name and number. Returning the tablet, she said, “I enjoyed talking to another artist.”

“Thanks, me too. Talk to you soon, Sarah. Bye for now.” Hoisting his duffel bag over his shoulder, Ralph strolled off. Sarah watched as he walked to his car and then drove off in a 1975 white Jeep. Then she climbed into her own car only to realize that she’d reversed a digit in her phone number. Damn. She liked him. Too bad, now she’d never hear from him.

The following night, after work, Sarah heard the phone ring as she scratched her key around the keyhole. Rushing to open the door before the phone stopped ringing, she dashed inside, grabbed the phone in mid-ring and was surprised to hear a deep, masculine voice ask, “Is this Sarah Shallot?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“Ralph Taylor. Remember we met yesterday at the laundromat? Did you give me the wrong number on purpose?”

“Did I give you a wrong number?” Sarah asked, all innocence.

“You sure did. You reversed the last two digits. Do you have dyslexia or something?” Without waiting for a response, Ralph continued, “I figured you must live in the neighborhood, or you wouldn’t have been in that laundromat. So I called every Shallot in the book.” Ralph laughed, “There was only one, but if there had been more, I’d have called every number listed.”

Sarah, thrilled that Ralph had searched for her, was caught off guard. Ralph chatted on, “I like you, Sarah, ‘cause you don’t look plastic like the stewardess I’ve been dating. Would you like to meet me for a drink?”

Sarah hesitated then said softly, “Ralph, I’m so much older than you, I . . .”

“Hey, girl, don’t sweat the age difference. I don’t like young girls. Women are more interesting. You sure are.”

“Well, uh, okay, Ralph, but I don’t drink. Do you want to come over to my apartment for a cup of tea?”

“Tea! Hey, that’s my favorite drink. I’ll be right over. Actually, I was hoping you’d ask; don’t hang up before you give me your address.”

Fifteen minutes later, Sarah opened the front door and welcomed Ralph. She prepared “tea for two” and appreciated Ralph’s obvious refinement. After all, how many men would accept tea rather than scotch? Ralph held his teacup with his little finger raised in the air, and Sarah giggled, “My father used to hold his little finger up, too. He said it was to hold his tea bag.”

Ralph smiled on cue, “That’s a good line,” he said, “I’ll have to remember to use it.”

His soothing voice relaxed Sarah as they talked about art and shared ideas. She was amazed they had so much in common, despite their differences in age and background.

Ralph sipped his second cup of tea, nibbled on a cookie, and volunteered, “My grandfather was a shoeshine boy in Memphis. Then the family moved west and my mother went to secretarial school. That was a big step for Mama. My Grandma raised me mostly; she refused to let my mother be a maid the way she was. She encouraged education. Now I’m a full-time student; the first person in my family to go to college. Because of my air force service, the government pays. It’s a struggle. I hate English; half the time when I speak up, the class doesn’t understand me. I don’t understand them, either. There ought to be a class in black English!” Ralph laughed and added, “The only class I shine in is art.”

Ralph refilled Sarah’s teacup and poured another cup for himself while she admired his manners; he had presence. She didn’t understand some of the Black English he used; Jack’s English was perfect. Why was she thinking about Jack when a “hunk” sat across from her? Was she into black men; attracted to Ralph because he reminded her of Bob, or because he had Jack’s complexion? Either way, she did like him.

At midnight Sarah walked Ralph to the door and he kissed her gently on the lips and said goodnight. At that moment, none of her speculation seemed important.

On Saturday night, Ralph took Sarah dancing and admired her short pleated skirt. “You’ve got the foxiest legs,” he said, as he eyed her shapely limbs and grinned. Sarah took “foxy” as a compliment.

On Sunday, Ralph escorted Sarah to the movies; he paid for their tickets and then announced, “Well, Baby, that’s the last cent until my GI check arrives.” Sarah had heard that line before; on her first date with Bob.

On the drive home from the theater, they discussed the film *The Day of the Locust* and both agreed they found it depressing. “Nothing much has changed in Hollywood, really,” Ralph volunteered. “You wouldn’t believe those uppity women in Beverly Hills!

I worked as a pool-boy for a while before I went into the service. I had so many offers from those rich bitches, it coulda' turned my head." Ralph laughed as he turned his head toward Sarah and said matter-of-factly, "Can I spend the night?"

Ralph followed Sarah into her apartment and into the bedroom. She cleared a pile of books off her bed. Sarah could tell how long it had been between lovers by the height of the books on the "his" side of her bed. Only two weeks ago she'd slept with an older man — old enough to be *her* father — but in bed, age made no difference. That lover had been short on muscles, but long on tenderness. No one, not even Jack, had nourished her body as he had. Sarah had done comparison shopping, and now she knew the difference between a good lover and a bad one. Ralph's shoulders were broad and his chest wide. When he cradled Sarah in his arms she felt as if his shoulders were wrapped around her. She felt protected and safe. When Ralph walked his soft fingertips down her cheeks and neck, or held her face between his hands and looked deep into her eyes, she thought she'd die of appreciation. With Ralph it wasn't "in, out and over." Sometimes he'd enter her three or four times in a couple of hours and they'd come together every time. Ralph's considerate foreplay, his passionate and lengthy lovemaking, proved to Sarah again that Bob's lovemaking—if you could call it that—was selfish, rough and abusive.

As a divorcee who could now make love without being in love, Sarah had learned her way around the bedroom. Her naïveté, however, remained the same in other matters. Ralph flattered Sarah with words like, "You value yourself. It's a special joy to be accepted by a woman like you. You have a fine mind, a youthful figure, and such a pretty face." Sarah chose to believe him. She needed a man's words to define her.

Five nights a week, Sarah rushed home from work to be near the phone when Ralph called, and three afternoons a week, she called Gloria to report, "It's so wonderful having continuity in my life again. I like having one steady lover. Ralph and I are growing more intimate every day; in bed and out."

"Do you love Ralph?"

“I don’t know. He tells me he loves me, and I tell him I do, but who knows what love is? I loved Bob for many years, and now that I’m being treated well, I’m beginning to doubt whether Bob really loved me at all.”

For four weekends Ralph arrived on Saturday morning and stayed with Sarah until Sunday night. Together they went to the grocery store where Ralph picked out his favorite foods and Sarah paid the bill. She unpacked the groceries, stacked them in the cupboard, cooked two meals a day, and washed all the dishes. Sarah managed to smile while she accomplished all the home-making activities she’d hated as a married woman. She delighted in having someone to cook for, to eat with, to make love to.

Slowly, over the months of their affair, Ralph lost his veneer of refinement. He rarely drank tea now. Some nights when he’d had too much wine, he’d lay beside Sarah in bed and repeat, “Motherfucker, motherfucker.” Sarah, listening to his blabberings, wondered what the hell she was doing in bed with this man who treated her like a wife-of-all-work when she wasn’t even married. She had the responsibilities of a wife but none of the benefits. At least Bob had paid for the groceries.

Sunday morning, Ralph stood near the stove talking to Sarah while she flipped pancakes. He talked to her while she poured the coffee. He talked about his problems over breakfast and he talked about his dreams as he watched her wash and dry the dishes. Not his dreams of the night before, but his dreams of his future in art.

“I’m gonna be a great artist. A *great* artist. Greater than Picasso. You’ll see, Baby. You’ll be proud of me.”

“I *am* proud of you, Ralph. You’ll make it. I know you will. You’re a dreamer like I am. I’ve been ridiculed all my life for living in a fantasy world. If I hear one more time, ‘Be a realist, get a full-time job and give up your dream of art,’ I’ll scream.”

“Who’s ever telling you that, Baby, is telling you bullshit. People who aren’t creative haven’t the foggiest notion of what it means to be a creative person. They have no understanding of the need to create. Remaining true to my art is a struggle, one a non-

artist can't possibly appreciate. We're artists, that's why we understand each other. Nothing will stop me. Don't allow anything or anyone to stop you."

Sarah listened to her black philosopher, appreciated his support, and knew why he remained in her life. He nibbled on her neck while she put away the silverware and when he asked, "Do you wanta go back to bed?" she readily agreed.

After dinner when Ralph announced, "I think I'll stay over tonight. I can go to class from here," Sarah was pleased.

"Great," she said, "we can read in bed until we're sleepy." They both carried art books to the bedroom, but Ralph read Sarah's body instead.

At midnight, moonlight cast shadows on Ralph's nude body as he slept peacefully beside Sarah. Her eyes caressed his body. She laid her hand lightly on Ralph's back and noted how pasty her skin looked next to his. White people were nuts. They blistered themselves in the sun while tanning and put black people down for their color. Ralph's coloring was perfect; so was his body. She laid her hand gently on Ralph's rounded butt; his bare ass looked like two loaves of Jewish rye.

She touched Ralph's "natural" with her open palm, ever so gently, not wanting to wake her "sleeping beauty." She remembered the first time she'd touched a natural. She'd expected Jack's hair to feel like brillo, brittle and scratchy, and was pleasantly surprised to find black hair soft and spongy.

Ralph's hair felt like warm cotton. She longed to sink her fingers into it but was afraid she'd awaken him. Instead, she examined one perfect circle of hair that had clung to her finger. Every hair on Ralph's head was a perfect circle, tight ringlets framed his face and his small, perfect ears. His face, so young and vulnerable as he slept, made Sarah's heart skip a beat as she admired her handsome lover and wondered if she were falling in love.

Ralph moaned in his sleep and threw a bare leg over Sarah the way Bob had. She didn't move, until her calf began to cramp. She thought of the lovemaking before Ralph

fell asleep, and wondered if her lover had held back his sweetness or did the emptiness she felt have anything to do with him?

Sarah compared everything Ralph said or did with Jack's behavior. If she couldn't have Jack, Ralph would do, he loved her. Sometimes she confused the two men. When Ralph said, "You have such a sweet stomach," Sarah thought Jack was in the room. Both men had commented on her scars and touched them gently. Something Bob had never done.

Sarah slipped quietly out of bed, peed, and slipped back into bed, still unable to sleep. She was miserable and sleepless when she was alone in bed, and thought she was sleepless and miserable with a man lying beside her.

Monday morning, as Ralph dressed for school, he announced, "I has somethin to tell you, Sarah. I wants us to be friends, but I have too much homework to come over every weekend. I wants you to start dating other men. I wants us to be friends, not lovers."

Sarah had heard it all before: from Bob, from Jack, and now from Ralph. What difference did it make, Sarah thought. She was miserable all the time anyway. Fuck men!

"So Ralph, when are you leaving?"

"Right now. Thanks for making it easy."

Sarah watched Ralph remove his toothbrush and his fat black comb with the wide teeth. She watched him gather up an extra shirt that hung in her closet, and she watched him as he headed for the door.

"Ralph, wait, I have something to tell you. I don't want to be just friends. Friends and lovers, or nothing."

"We'll see. We'll see," Ralph murmured as he enclosed Sarah in a bear hug and kissed her with more passion than he had given her in bed the night before. "We'll see."

Sarah closed the door behind Ralph and leaned into it. He'd be back; she wasn't sure she cared.

Sarah called work and reported in “sick”; the first time she’d ever played hooky. With a mischievous grin on her face, she marched down the steps to her studio, prepared to spend the rest of the day collaging paper and ribbon to the side of a playpen she’d salvaged from the dump.

In the studio she glanced at her framed diploma. She’d graduated from college in June. Big deal! She’d toiled for that BFA for over twenty years and what good was her Bachelor of Art degree? If she’d graduated in 1950 with her class, it would have meant something; she would have been qualified to teach art to high school students. Now that same teaching job required a master’s degree.

Elizabeth and Bob had acknowledged Sarah’s achievement. Her mother sent a card and a check for ten dollars. Bob’s checkless card had a note at the bottom, “No one ever said you weren’t persistent!” The twins called to congratulate her, but there were no hugs, and Sarah had never worn the cap and gown she’d dreamed of; her degree arrived in the mail.

She had one consolation, her “continuing art education” provided her with a keen understanding of the major changes in the art world over the last twenty-five years. She’d been trained to use oils as a painting medium; in the sixties, she switched to acrylics. It wasn’t only art supplies that became passé, it was attitude. She’d studied through: Realism, Abstract Expressionism, Op and Pop. Without that understanding of current trends, she would not have understood Ralph’s art. Ralph! She wasn’t going to waste her “day off” thinking about him.

Sarah’s eyes roamed to the wall calendar and she gasped; in less than six weeks, her deal with Victor Warner would expire. She’d have to locate a new apartment, and pronto, but livable housing could cost a fortune. Where would she find the money for that?

Money, money, money. Sarah had turned up her nose in contempt at Bart’s and Bob’s preoccupation with it, and now she thought about money, or rather the lack of it, full-time.

No more procrastinating; she'd have to find another apartment, and the sooner the better. Sarah turned on her heel and marched back up the stairs. In her apartment, she perused the APARTMENTS FOR RENT in yesterday's *Sunday Times* and circled one ad after another that looked promising. Every morning for the rest of the week she searched the Los Angeles area for new digs.

It didn't take her long to realize that elevator buildings with swimming pools were completely out of the question. One afternoon, on her way to work, she spotted a sign in front of a reasonable looking brick building in Westwood Village and she jotted down the number. She called the following day and discovered that a one-bedroom apartment in that building cost more than three times her bi-monthly paycheck.

Every apartment Sarah considered proved to be too expensive. Nevertheless, as the end of June neared, she called Victor Warner's office and told his secretary, "Please tell Victor I've decided not to purchase the building. I'll be moving by the end of July." Now Sarah knew her move was inevitable. Despite her lack of funds, she felt confident she'd find an apartment in the next week or two.

In bed late that night, she opened her journal and reread her last entry: "Love, work, and knowledge are the well-springs of life." Just then the phone rang and jangled her nerves. She leaped out of bed cursing, "Who the hell is calling me at 1 A.M.?"

"Hi, Sarah. What's happening?"

"Hi, Ralph," she answered, as if it were one in the afternoon. They chatted as if they were still on the best of terms, as if they'd spoken yesterday and not eight days earlier.

"Sarah, I hate to tell you this . . . but . . . well . . . in fact, I'm afraid to tell you. I just found out I was exposed to V.D. the night before I spent that last weekend at your house. Honest, Baby, I didn't know before, but I just peed and it burned like hell. I'm sorry."

“You’re sorry!” Sarah screamed into the phone. “Don’t ever call me again. Ever!” She banged down the receiver. “That bastard!” Two-timing her while they were still lovers. She never wanted to see Ralph again as long as she lived.

In the morning, Sarah drove to L.A., not to apartment hunt, but to locate a clinic. The clinic was free to women who had reproductive organs, free for pills to avoid unwanted pregnancies, free for women with children living at home. Sarah didn’t qualify for free treatment at this clinic any more than she’d qualified for legal aid. She laughed and said to the smiling black woman at the registration desk, “I probably wouldn’t qualify for first aid. God, I don’t know what to do next.”

“I like your spirit, Ms. Shallot, but we lose our funding if we don’t stick to the rules. But . . . well, just sit here. I’ll go talk to my supervisor, maybe I can untie a few strings.” The woman returned in minutes and asked Sarah some leading questions and provoked the right answers. She willingly fudged the clinic’s forms and Sarah received her free examination.

Sarah’s legs were up in stirrups once more, only this time the examiner was a woman. “I’m not a doctor or a midwife, Ms. Shallot, but we do have special training for this work. So, don’t be concerned about my qualifications.”

Sarah was too embarrassed to be concerned. She felt guilty, dirty, and filled with shame; humiliated to find herself in this untenable position.

The “trained” woman didn’t judge or condemn Sarah. She didn’t snicker when she said, “Take these pills. All the labs will be closed tomorrow for conference meetings, so there is no way to be tested for V.D. We’ll assume you’ve got it, although it won’t be a positive diagnosis until you’re tested. Be sure you take your medication regularly.” Sarah paid \$5 for the pills; the women with ovaries received their medication without charge.

Sarah had sworn at Ralph, now she swore off him. The following night, at midnight, Ralph’s friend, Buck, called and said, “Ralph wants to talk to you.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk to him! Tell him to drop dead!” Sarah shouted and banged the phone down in Buck’s ear.

A minute later he called back and said, “Don’t hang up. If you don’t want to talk to Ralph, he understands, but he wants you to know it was a false alarm.”

Sarah swallowed her last pill, just in case, before she returned to bed. Alone. She was determined to keep men out of her bed. Forever.

With ten days remaining before she had to vacate the San Pedro apartment, Sarah’s confidence waned. She called Jack: “Did you mean it when you said I could move in with you? If I don’t find an apartment today, I don’t have another option. If you’re willing, I might have to take you up on your offer.”

“Sarah, I meant it when I made the offer and it still stands. Besides, I’m rarely home. It’s no big deal.” Sarah wondered who Jack’s new “old lady” was.

“Thanks, Jack, I knew I could depend on you. I’ll call you tonight and let you know if I have any luck today.”

Sarah emptied her mailbox on the way to her car. She inspected the return address of the lone envelope and when she read Victor Warner Associates, her fingers trembled as she slit open the envelope and gingerly pulled out the contents. “Damn Bill,” she thought, as she read the legal notice. “That son-of-a-bitch,” she muttered, retracing her steps.

Back in her apartment, she dialed Victor’s office and said clearly to his secretary, “This is Sarah Shallot. Please give this message to Victor and to his partner, Bill. I am not paying the last month’s rent. I paid for that when I moved in. Tell Bill if he so much as calls me or leaves another fake legal notice in my door or my mailbox, I will call the building authorities in San Pedro and notify them that this building had no permit for renovation.”

Sarah hung up the phone in high spirit. She drove to the city congratulating herself all the way. Standing up to authority beat the hell out of playing patsy. At a red

light, she checked out the circled ad on the seat beside her, then pulled into the next gas station and asked for directions to an area known as Palms.

Driving slowly down a palm-bordered street, she located the address, knocked on the door of a stucco house, and introduced herself. Ben, the landlord, drove her the mile-and-a-half to the vacant apartment. There wasn't a palm tree in sight when he parked at the curb in front of a whitewashed apartment complex.

When Sarah entered the ground floor apartment and looked at the fresh white paint on the living room walls and the freshly cleaned leaf-green wall to wall carpeting, she liked this apartment. Light flooded in from the open draped windows and the built-in bookcases, on each side of the bay window, were made to order. She followed the landlord into both bedrooms, they too were filled with light, and so was the kitchen. Back in the living room, Ben waited patiently while Sarah re-walked the empty apartment. She lingered in the front bedroom, admiring the bird-of-paradise on the other side of the sparkling clean window. The purple and orange flower petals were stunning in the sunlight and she visualized using this room as her studio. She could use the back bedroom for sleeping. This apartment had double the space of her apartment in San Pedro.

Sarah asked Ben if she might use the bathroom and, seated on the toilet, she surveyed the room in more detail. This bathroom was special; it had a built-in bathtub, and a separate glass-doored shower, both tiled with Mexican ceramic. Sarah almost clapped her hands in delight. A real shower, not that makeshift tin shower she'd endured since she'd moved to California. Now if she could just afford the rent.

Returning to the living room, she said, "This is a lovely apartment. How much is the rent?"

"\$165 a month."

"I'll take it," Sarah said, without hesitation, "but why is the rent so low?"

Ben smiled and answered, "Because I want to attract a certain kind of tenant. Twenty-five other people have wanted this apartment, but you are the first one I've offered it to."

"Why me?"

"I like creative people. I'm a closet-artist myself. I want everyone in this complex to get along; it saves me a lot of headaches. There are only ten apartments, and they all face the garden you'll share. If all my tenants are compatible, I have less trouble."

Sarah doubted Ben's "twenty-five other people," but said with a smile, "Thanks. I'll write you a check right now for first and last. I'd like to move in next week."

That night she called Jack and reported with enthusiasm, "I can't believe it. A beautiful, clean apartment with two bedrooms and a covered garage for \$165. I'm really lucky. It's a first floor and has a front and back door, like a house."

"Sarah, where did you say that apartment was?"

"I didn't. It's in a place called Palms."

"Well, I don't want to disappoint you, Baby, but you'll still be in a ghetto. That's a changing neighborhood; the whites are moving out, and the blacks are moving in. Did you meet any of the other tenants?"

"No."

The following day Sarah called the phone and the utility companies, canceling one order and placing another. Next, she called the local pet shop. Her pal Larry, the owner, greeted her with, "Hi, funny lady."

"Well, Larry my friend, I've got a funny idea now. Would you please start saving cockroaches?"

"Huh?"

"Larry, I'm moving to Palms next week. You know how many times you stopped to say Hi and ended up killing roaches for me? You know how many times I emptied drawers and closets? Well, I found this dump filled with cockroaches, and I worked my

ass off exterminating them. Now I want Bill to find this apartment just the way he rented it to me. After I move out, I want you to throw a bag of cockroaches into the apartment.”

Larry roared with laughter. “Depend on it, Sarah. It’s as good as done.”

“Thanks, buddy. I knew I could count on you.” Sarah hung up, doubled over with laughter.

CHAPTER 32

Palms was an integrated ghetto located six miles south of Beverly Hills, where a boutique on Rodeo Drive promoted a solid gold bird cage, complete with a living canary. Salesmen announced, “Canaries are replaced free of charge for a lifetime.” In Palms the deli on Fairfax Avenue advertised its merchandise on hand-lettered, butcher paper signs. Sarah viewed the window menu: “Corned Beef—Matzo Ball Soup” as she drove past.

Two blocks west of Fairfax stood the California stucco houses with the manicured lawns and white owners. Two blocks east, where Sarah lived, the lawns were as well cared for, but the housing was integrated. Sarah’s new apartment complex housed ten whites and two blacks and they integrated the otherwise solid black neighborhood. The farther east and south you walked, the darker the neighborhood. Voters in Palms came in all shapes, colors, and sizes. Short, blue-eyed Jewish men wore Yarmulke’s like the pope and voted side by side with brown-eyed black men in stacked heels that made them appear taller; their clothing as colorful as Joseph’s robe.

Sarah was sandwiched between two very different worlds. In Beverly Hills, stony-faced matrons wore diamonds and shopped for furs, while Sarah wore blue jeans, purchased an Elizabeth Arden lipstick at Bonwits, and left the fashionable store feeling depressed.

Women in Beverly Hills wore designer jeans from Sax or , I. Magnin’s, while Sarah purchased her jeans off the rack at Sears. In Palms, Sarah shopped for groceries at the integrated grocery store where blue jeans were a uniform, and she counted her change at the check-out counter. Sarah’s neighbors wore no diamonds or furs, but she preferred them; they were down-to-earth and practical, not pretentious and puffed up.

Ben, the landlord, hadn’t mentioned the integrated neighborhood, but he had told the truth about his tenants. All of them were creative. The handsome black married

couple in the front apartment across from hers both worked in television, while the unmarried Caucasian couple across the garden in the opposite direction had reversed the traditional roles. Mia worked as a legal secretary at MGM by day and studied for her law degree at night. Richard, unemployed and waiting for his big break, kept house. He crossed the garden daily to pound on Sarah's door and pop in to ask for the proverbial cup of sugar. What he really wanted was conversation.

Richard shared his recipes and Sarah asked his advice about everything, but cooking. With Richard home all day and available for any emergency, it was Sarah who tapped on Richard's door to ask, "Would you mind? My fuse just blew." In Palms, Sarah was no longer dependent on Jack to do the "manly" work and maintain her living quarters. Now Richard helped her. In San Pedro she had lived in relative isolation; in Palms she rejoiced at the easy companionship available in the apartment complex.

All but two of her neighbors were friendly; the other ten seemed as eager for Sarah's friendship as she was for theirs. Her favorite, Shirley Brinkman, was a free-lance journalist/ photographer. "Shirl," a never-married, single who was about Ralph's age, lived in a one-bedroom apartment above Richard and Mia. A voluptuous brunette, Shirl wore her sexuality like a jangle bracelet. She'd swish into Sarah's apartment after a morning shoot, wearing a jean skirt, a faded silk blouse, the top three buttons open, flashing her cleavage like a prize, and Sarah would feel like Mother Hubbard.

Shirl's enthusiastic personality matched Sarah's — on her good days — and the women had the common interest of "the arts." Shirl had a network of creative single friends in their twenties and thirties who eked out their livelihood, without nine-to-five jobs. She encouraged Sarah to follow their example.

Once or twice a week, Sarah would slap sandwiches together and the two women would carry their paper plates into the garden. Sitting cross-legged on the grass, the sun caressing their faces, they would discuss the difference in their lifestyles.

“You’re too conservative, Sarah. Even in your blue jeans you look like a Beverly Hill’s matron. Your artwork is so full of verve and yet, sometimes you dress like a maiden aunt. What’s with you?”

“I wish I knew. Sometimes I feel as young as you, and sometimes I feel old enough to be your mother.”

“No way. You might be around my mother’s age chronologically, but emotionally, my mother’s old enough to be yours. You’re so full of life. Ideas bounce around in your head like clothes in a dryer. I’ll bet it’s your boring job at the hospital that keeps you trapped. Even I couldn’t be spontaneous if I had to deal with cranky cancer patients every night. Why don’t you just quit and free-lance like I do. You’ve got the talent.”

“Quit my job! Oh, no. Living on the edge the way you do, I’d worry myself to death over making rent money every month.”

“I’ll admit, I worried a lot in the beginning. But you’d be surprised how jobs find you once you give yourself permission to live the way you want to.”

Sarah appreciated Shirl’s advice, but felt too insecure to follow it. She continued working at the hospital, grateful that she no longer had to spend hours driving to and from San Pedro. From Palms she could drive to Westwood in forty minutes.

Now when she awoke in the morning, as sunlight filtered through the closed living room drapes, she was eager to begin her day. She’d filled both bedrooms with studio equipment and chose to place the bed frame and mattress in the living room bay. She considered her double mattress a window seat and covered it with an inexpensive Indian spread purchased at one of the interesting stores she’d discovered in Santa Monica. She showered the colorful spread with dime store pillows and curled up under the bay window to read whenever she had time. In Palms her living quarters had the same warm ambiance as her San Pedro studio; space for homemaker and artist were no longer separate.

In the kitchen she draped one of Bart's "bullshit protectors" around a cup handle, and used it for a centerpiece on her glass-topped table. Near the stove she hung Glo's housewarming present —a poster that read: "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

When she received her bi-monthly check from the hospital, Sarah purchased more plants and surrounded her new ceramic pots of cut-leaf philodendron and potted palms with pebbles and shells she'd collected on the beach. Outside her front door, she placed potted geranium plants on the two cement steps and the landing; suspending a dangling pot of ivy from the overhang above. Each time Sarah entered or exited her new apartment, the flowers were there to greet her and she was proud that she'd found a comfortable "home."

When she awakened at night to the sounds of police or ambulance sirens, she thought she still lived in San Pedro. When she heard car engines groan and tires squeal, Sarah wondered what she was doing living in another unsafe neighborhood. But in the morning when she raised the shade in her bedroom/studio and looked out at "her" Bird of Paradise, she was convinced she'd found a wonderful new way of life.

Sarah had read about and envied the exciting lives of the writers and artists who'd shared their lives in the Greenwich Village of the 1920s. Now she'd found her own Greenwich Village in Palms and reveled in the creative atmosphere. Her neighbors wrote plays, composed music, quoted poetry, and shared their interests while picnicking in their communal garden on Sundays. They shared pots of homemade soup and freshly baked bread while they discussed art and philosophy or the hottest new writer, movie, or exhibition at the County Museum. Sarah no longer felt spiritually deprived as she had in San Pedro and Vanderville; she relished this newfound intellectual stimulation. With a college degree, she no longer felt insecure about a lack of education and freely joined the discussions. Her self-confidence grew as she found her opinions validated.

Shirl continued to urge Sarah to quit her job at the Medical Center, but Sarah repeatedly apologized and explained, "I know you're right, but I just can't quit. I need a

steady income. Besides, it's not so bad; I just got a substantial raise and now I have the top assignment. It's almost fun now that I register movie stars. I just couldn't handle the stress of free-lancing. Don't you shake to death worrying about rent money?"

"Sometimes, but somehow or other the rent gets paid. You won't be able to find what you're searching for until you quit that damn job, raise or not!"

Straights like Gloria advised Sarah, "Don't quit your job until you've found a new one," while creative personalities like Shirley advised her to quit and risk her future. Gloria tolerated her job as a court reporter while Shirl adored her work. Jack had the best of both worlds; he loved photography, and while he'd never be wealthy, he enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle.

Sarah listened, observed other's choices, and concluded that her new lifestyle was perfect. For now. Artwork in the morning and money-work in the afternoon. She had companionship, no more lonely dinners in front of the TV. On her fifteen-minute coffee break at 6:00 P.M., she gobbled her dinner in the hospital cafeteria.

She hadn't heard from Bob since the day of their divorce, and in her new environment Sarah found that sometimes days would pass without her even thinking of him. Her contentment, however, was jarred the night that Bob did call. She heard his familiar voice and her heart pounded with excitement and fear. "Why are you calling me, Bob?" she asked, her voice high-pitched with nervousness.

"Louise tells me you're coming to Vanderville next week."

"That's right. It's been ten months since the divorce and you still haven't sent the money the court awarded me. I'm coming to Chicago to collect. Of course, if you want to send me your check for my half of the house, I'll skip the trip and save the air fare!"

"You'll get that money when I'm damn good and ready, and not one day sooner. And you can't come to Vanderville."

"What do you mean, can't? You don't own me anymore. I'll be there next week and I'll see you in court if I have to."

“Sarah, did someone tell you I’m getting married the Saturday after Thanksgiving?”

“MARRIED! No, no one told me. If you’ve got the money to remarry so quickly, you’ve got the money to send me my check!”

“Screw that check and screw you!” Bob screamed into the phone and Sarah could almost see his eyes bulge as he shouted “*I’m getting married! Get out of my life and stay out!*” She heard the click and held the disconnected phone in stunned silence while Bob’s words replayed in her head.

Sarah paced from the living room to the studio, from the studio to the kitchen. “Married!” Now her marriage was really over. The divorce hadn’t finished it, but Bob’s remarriage would. She could no longer delude herself; there would be no reconciliation. She continued pacing and talking to herself until she felt calm enough to call the twins. First, she dialed Josh’s number in San Diego and said, “Your father’s getting married, Josh. Did you know?”

“Yes, Ma, I knew, but I didn’t want to be the one to tell you. Dad asked Johnny and me to be his best men, but we both refused. We told Dad we didn’t approve of his remarrying so quickly.”

“Thanks Josh. I love you. Talk to you soon.”

Next she called John: “Johnny, when you were sixteen you said, ‘life’s a barrel of shit, and a thimble full of happiness,’ and I asked you how you got so wise so young. Now I wonder why it took me so long to recognize the equation. Thanks for not being your father’s best man. I love you.”

Sarah sat with her hand on the stilled phone. Well, at least her sons loved her. That was something. Then she lifted the receiver once more and dialed Louise’s number. When Lou answered, she asked, “Did you know?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you, but it wasn’t my place. I did tell Bob that if he didn’t call and tell you, I would, and that made him furious. I’ve never stood up to him before. Sarah, I’m so sorry. You know we’ll all have to attend the wedding.”

“I can’t talk anymore, Lou. Thanks.” Sarah hung up, still unable to find relief from news that she considered devastating. She couldn’t stand the thought of Bob and Lorraine married and living in her house. Lorraine using the closet she designed. Lorraine in her bathroom. Lorraine in her bedroom, in her bed. No, she wouldn’t think about *that*. She’d call Jack.

He answered after five rings and said, “Hey, Sarah, it’s good to hear from you.”

Sarah ignored his greeting and started right in, “Bob’s getting married, and I . . .”

Jack listened patiently without interrupting and then consoled her by saying, “You’ve been through hell the last couple of years, but this is only the second time you’ve broken down completely. You’re strong, Sarah, believe it. You pulled yourself together after your divorce and eviction, and you will this time, too. Believe me, you’ll be better off with Bob completely out of your life. The worst is over. Stop fooling around waiting for Bob to send your money. Fly to Chicago as you planned and take him to court. And when you’re back in Chicago, remember what I told you, just pretend you’re a camera. Watch it all, be an observer; you’ll hurt less that way.”

Sarah did fly to Chicago, but rather than incur the expense of returning to court, she returned to her former home in Vanderville. “Dressed to kill,” with the knowledge that Bob had hired a cop to protect the house and contents from her, she tapped lightly on “her” front door. When the uniformed officer appeared, she smiled beatifically and said, “I’m the former Mrs. Shallot. When Judge Shallot returns from his wedding, would you be kind enough to give him my note?” The sergeant, looking more than perplexed, allowed that he would.

Smiling serenely, Sarah walked to her borrowed car, aware that her note would undoubtedly cause Bob apoplexy and that Lorraine, and not she, would have to listen to him rant and rave. In her note she’d warned, “I will not return to California empty handed this time. Save yourself a lot of grief and give me a cashier’s check for my half of the house and its contents. *NOW*. I want my half of the Great Books. Immediately. I

plan a surprise for you each day that you keep me waiting. Good luck on your marriage to Lorraine, you're going to need it, you fool."

The following morning, she pranced into Bob's office, before he arrived, smiled sweetly at Elsie, the secretary she'd hired, and said, "I have a few things I left in Bob's office." She marched past Elise's desk without waiting for a reply. From a wall in Bob's office she removed an abstract painting of a fisherman, fish net, and lures. Bob didn't deserve anything she'd created for him. Walking past his desk, with the artwork under her arm, she spied a picture of Lorraine that had replaced hers. The cheap bastard. He'd used the same frame for both his wives. Furious, Sarah tore the picture from its silver mounting and ripped Lorraine's smiling face to shreds. She pushed the fragments into a neat pile and scribbled a note, "Tomorrow I toilet paper the trees in front of the house unless I receive my check. The following day, if necessary, I'll picket and wear a sign that says, 'Judge Shallot doesn't pay his bills.'" "

That afternoon Sarah received a phone call from Bob's attorney. "Bob tells me you tore up his office this morning."

"No, I didn't tear up his office. I tore up his bride's picture. If he doesn't give me my check, I'll do worse than that!"

Laughing, the attorney responded, "Well, I can't really blame you. Okay, you win. Stop in my office tomorrow morning and I'll have Bob's check and six volumes of the Great Books ready for you."

"Six volumes? More like 20! But okay, I'll pick up my check in the morning."

Sarah flew back to L.A. with check in hand. Twenty-eight thousand dollars wasn't much for twenty-five years of loyal service. By the time Bob had deducted for unpaid back taxes and house repairs, there wasn't much left for a cash settlement. Nevertheless, it was the largest check Sarah had ever received and it would temporarily ease her financial woes. When the beach house sold, she'd receive her share, but that check would be considerably less.

Sarah mailed bank drafts of one thousand dollars to Josh and Johnny. She tried convincing herself that she'd sent money to her sons because she loved them, but she knew in her heart the real reason was guilt. The divorce had disrupted their lives as well as hers, and she wanted to make amends.

When Jack arrived for his weekly visit, she picked his brain about investments. He told her about certificates of deposits and after checking out a book on finance from the library, she took his advice. She divided the money into one year, two year, and three month C.D.s The interest supplemented her pay and weekly check from Bob. She was ready when Shirl said, "Sarah, I'm a lot younger than you, but take my advice. You're wasting your life at that hospital. Believe me, life is to be lived, it's not a dress rehearsal. The world belongs to those of us willing to risk. Create your own career. You have the talent and courage to freelance. Trust yourself.

After the Christmas holidays Sarah returned to work, determined to make a go of free-lancing. Shaking and insecure, she approached her supervisor and said, "I'm giving you two weeks' notice, starting now," and Mr. Hurry Up replied, "I'll be sorry to see you go. You've been a good, conscientious worker." Was this the same jerk who'd called her stupid? Sarah giggled all the way home, eager to report to Shirl, Gloria, and Jack that she would now be her own boss. Shirley was right, "Once you set a course of action, doors open that you couldn't dream possible." By Sarah's second week of free-lancing, she had two painting commissions, had joined a co-op gallery in Venice, and was busy with planning meetings for a show she'd proposed. Then a neighbor overheard her worrying over money as she lunched in the garden with Shirl. He suggested she work for him five afternoons a week.

Craig's office, two blocks from the apartment complex, was an informal affair and Sarah biked to work in the jeans she'd worn since morning. Craig purchased odd-lots of overstock merchandise at a large discount from a variety of clients and then imaginatively resold the collection at a cut-rate. Sarah typed Craig's letters in the small front office without anyone standing over her complaining about her lack of speed. She

wrote out Craig's checks, waited for his signature and, during slack periods, she helped Horace, the only other employee.

In the back work-room, Sarah watched Horace screw nuts and bolts into yellow plastic lamp bases, while she secured the white shades with staples. Horace fit the electric cords and Sarah listened to him talk nonstop, despite the fact that he stuttered badly.

"I-I-I've beeeen aaahhh pusssherrr," Horace informed her, while every other word stuck to his tongue. "I-I-I been ah adddictt. I've beeennn in prissssonnn. I dddon't remember my fatherrr. Myyy sister wassss murdered."

Sarah listened intently, fascinated by the details of Horace's life. She'd never met anyone like him before, and was amazed at his revelations. Until she'd heard Horace's life stories, she'd assumed only underprivileged blacks had lives of misery. Horace was Caucasian and his life story made Ralph's sound middle-class.

Each weekday afternoon at 4:30, as Sarah peddled her bike back to her apartment, she contrasted Horace's life with her own. Deprived as she sometimes felt, compared to Horace, she was living in comfort. His life, as well as hers, had been filled with violence, yet Horace spoke of it matter of factly, while Sarah hid the dark secret of Bart's murder.

Sarah kept other's secrets as well. When Shirley had an abortion, Sarah didn't tell a soul, but helped her friend through the ordeal with emotional support. She also provided the proverbial chicken soup. She knew she could never abort a child, but felt each woman had the right to make her own choice. She thanked God she didn't have to worry about getting pregnant.

Pedaling on a side street, without traffic, Sarah thought of the wild experiences she'd had since she arrived in L.A.; nothing in Vanderville compared to it. Like the time she'd gone to an artist's party in Pasadena and watched a nude man, dripping wet, walk across the living room searching for a towel. She left *that* party immediately without saying good-bye to the host. Or the time her date, a record producer, took her to a famous recording artist's penthouse. They were invited to stay for the evening meal, and

Sarah volunteered to help with the dinner preparations. The star's inexperienced, young girlfriend disapproved of the way Sarah sliced an apple — the bimbo. There was no *right* way to slice an apple for fruit salad. Sarah had sliced apples before that twit was even born. As far as Sarah was concerned, it would have been far better to let the apple rot in the fridge than to jam it down the disposal.

While locking her bike in the carport, Sarah realized that those personal experiences could not be expressed in painting or sculpture, not even collage. She wondered if she could express her feelings about them in writing.

After keying her way into her apartment, Sarah switched on the radio before she dropped her purse on a chair and music and sunlight filled the living room. Sometimes the L.A. behavior shocked and offended her sensibilities, but life in the city sure beat the hell out of the boredom of Vanderville. The homogenized, ethnocentric people who lived there would die of shock if they knew the judge's ex-wife slept around.

Sarah was grateful she didn't have to deal with birth control. That thought reminded her of Shirley, and on impulse she called her and asked, "How about going out for burgers and fries? I've had it with cooking. Maybe we can take in a movie, too. How about it?"

Now that Sarah's income had increased, she delighted in treating herself to the occasional luxury. It was a real convenience having a friend who lived close by. Spontaneity appealed to Sarah, and both women felt a measure of safety when they returned from an evening out and parked in a less than desirable neighborhood.

Sarah saw more of Shirl and less of Gloria since she'd moved to L.A., but they'd made the decision to share the cost of toll calls. Saturday morning was Sarah's turn and she dialed the number. "Hi Glo, it's me. Living in Palms is a real trip. Wait 'till I tell you what happened last night. Sleeping in the living room I don't miss a trick. At midnight I heard music and peeked through the drapes. Believe it or not, a flame-red convertible was slowly driving past with a black conga drummer standing up in the back seat beating out his rhythms. The sound of the drum was what drew me to the window in

the first place. I like the beat, the pulse of the city, but honest to God, Glo, some of the things I hear shock the shit out of me.”

“You’re finally becoming a mensch. So Sarah, what are you going to kveetch about today?”

“Give me a break! It wasn’t a complaint, more of an oy vey.”

“Hey, you’re catching on to Yiddish. So, what’s the latest shocker?”

“Well,” Sarah confided, “you won’t believe this one. Wait a minute, I want to light a cigarette.” She took a deep drag and continued, “Shirl told me about a friend of hers. This woman slept with another woman and a man!”

“What’s the big deal? It’s called a sandwich. If it’s two blacks and a white, it’s called an Oreo.”

“My God, Gloria, you haven’t . . .?”

“Grow up! Of course not. But I hear things in court that would curl your hair. In Vanderville you were kept in cotton bunting; now you’re learning what life is like in the fast lane.”

“Hang on a minute, Glo, my landlord’s trying to open my screen door.”

Sarah held the handset in one hand and called from across the room, “Yes, Ben, what can I do for you?”

“Your door’s locked and I’m leaving now. Do you have time to go to bed?”

“I can’t Ben,” Sarah laughed, “my nose is bleeding.”

“Damn,” Ben muttered as he backed away.

Sarah raised the phone back to her ear and said, “Gloria, did you hear that?”

“Only the part about your nose bleeding. What’s going on?”

“I cannot believe what just happened. I’ve waved to my landlord a couple of times when he was putzing around the flowers, or mowing the lawn, but I’ve never had a real conversation with him since I moved in. In fact, I haven’t seen him for months, and here I am sitting in my own living room, sunlight streaming in, talking to you and this nebbish tries to walk in my door — good thing my screen was locked —and he yells,

‘do you have time to go to bed with me?’ Can you believe that? The nerve! Is this what single means, any jerk can ask to bed me?”

When Sarah hung up fifteen minutes later, she remained at her desk. She was delighted that she’d had a quick response to Ben’s invitation, and was pleased with her witty reply. Single, she decided, meant doing *what* she wanted *when* she wanted. Single meant not needing to explain or apologize. Single wasn’t so bad; Sarah liked calling her own shots.

Her reverie was interrupted by another knock on the door; only this time it was Shirl. Sarah leaped to her feet, unlocked the screen, and offered a cup of tea. Once Shirl was settled on the bean bag, Sarah lounged on the bed and regaled her friend with a tale rich with imagery.

“This crazy doctor wanted me to understand his work before he gave me a commission to create a collage for his reception room. He decked me out in one of his white coats, hung a stethoscope around my neck, and dragged me into his examining room. He advised his male patient, laying prone on the examining table, ‘This is my assistant.’ The patient looked at me with such respect and asked my advice. All I could do was nod and smile while the doctor said, ‘My assistant doesn’t speak English.’ My art patron may be a doctor, but he is definitely weird. He’s a brain surgeon who needs *his* head examined.”

Shirl wiped laughter-tears from her eyes and pleaded, “Stop, you’re cracking me up! Write that down.” Sarah was flattered, after all, Shirley had an English degree and wrote for a living. With hesitance, Sarah confided, “I have written a few things. Would you like to read what I wrote about B-girls?”

“What’s a B-girl? Sure, I’d love to.”

When Shirl finished reading, she held the pages in her hands and said, “I had a feeling you could write; you have the gift. I’m attending a writer’s conference in July; will you come with me?”

Sarah was pleased, but distrustful. In the past, Shirley had built up her ego and then later destroyed it. Like the time Sarah knocked on her door to discuss a pressing problem and Shirley had sneered, “Go home and talk into your tape deck. I don’t want to listen to you whine.”

After that remark, Sarah had avoided Shirley by using her kitchen door, rather than risk bumping into her in the garden. On the third day, Shirley arrived at Sarah’s front door with a peace offering—a bouquet of yellow daisies—and Sarah had warmed to her again.

Now Sarah looked into Shirley’s eyes and asked, “Do you really mean I write well enough to attend a writer’s conference? Hell, I can’t even spell.”

“So what! Steinbeck said millions of people can spell, but very few can write. You can, so come with me.” Digging into her purse, Shirley removed a conference brochure, handed it to Sarah, and said, “Here, look at this.”

After two weeks of encouragement, Sarah finally accepted Shirley’s invitation to the Santa Barbara Writer’s conference. A week after she’d mailed in her registration, Shirley announced, “I don’t have the money to attend. I can’t go. But you can and should. It’s only a two-hour drive. And don’t worry about reading your work aloud, the leaders will critique it and you’ll learn a lot.”

“Oh, no. I’ll cancel, too. I don’t want to go alone.”

“Grow up, girl. A single independent woman goes it alone, no matter what.”

In July, Sarah drove along the Coast Highway to Santa Barbara, feeling expectant, terrified that she’d make a fool of herself sharing her writing with strangers. Her writing was so primitive, so earthy. Sarah was a closet writer, not a *real* one. Just allowing Shirley to read her piece about B-girls almost did her in.

The further north she drove, the more she enjoyed the scenery. By the time she reached Santa Barbara, she’d convinced herself that if all else failed, at least she’d have a

vacation; her first since she left Bob. She was determined to have fun, whether or not she learned anything about writing.

When Sarah arrived, the first person who spoke to her was Stephanie O'Connell, who stood in line behind her at the reception desk in the Miramar lobby. Steffie said, "I'm not a professional writer, yet, but this is my second conference. Have you attended before?" By the time Sarah reached the head of the line, she was chatting easily with her new friend and was delighted when the registrar informed her that Steffie was her assigned roommate.

Monday through Thursday mornings, Sarah attended the poetry workshop while Steffie slept in after another all-night session reading her work aloud and listening to others do the same. Sarah had managed to avoid reading aloud for four days and hoped to escape it all together.

On Friday, the last day of the conference, Sarah shared her B-girl pages with Steffie, and nervously awaited her response. After reading it over for the second time, Steffie insisted that Sarah attend the night workshop. "Do it! Your work is good. Don't let this whole conference go by without getting some feedback. You've got nothing to lose, and a lot to gain."

At 8:00 that evening, Sarah fidgeted on a high-backed wooden chair in one of Miramar's small conference rooms. She half-listened to a man in a green suit and green and white polka-dot tie read his work. She was nervous and embarrassed at the prospect of reading aloud and sharing one of her secrets. After she read, these strangers would know she was a tavern owner's daughter. What would they think when they knew she knew about bar-girls? She coughed nervously and twisted her pinkie ring, remembering one of her mother's rules: "What happens in *this* family we keep to ourselves."

Sarah quivered when she heard her name called and looked up to see Terry Brannon, the leader, looking straight at her. "Your name is Sarah?" he asked. She nodded yes and Terry said, "Read your work now."

Her back rigid, her mouth dry, her handwritten pages fluttering in her hand, Sarah choked out the first paragraph: “The odor of decaying beer penetrated her soul”

When Sarah finished, she looked timidly at the leader, prepared to hear the worst, and was pleasantly surprised when he said, “That was very interesting. Your character, Bart, has pizzazz. Why not use him as the lead character in a novel; he’s far too entertaining to waste in a short-story.” Awed by Terry’s words, Sarah almost gasped out loud.

In the morning, after a couple of hours sleep, Sarah and Steffie left their packed suitcases on their beds and headed to the dining room for a leisurely farewell breakfast. “Let’s be roommates next year,” Steffie suggested. “And, let’s stay in touch. I live about fifty miles from L.A., so we can get together once in a while. I don’t want to wait a whole year before I see you again.”

Sarah drove south down the scenic Coast Highway toward L.A., her mind replaying the entire week. Despite her fear and trepidation, she read aloud and gained approval. She had a great time and she learned a hell of a lot about writing. One prominent, successful author had given an afternoon lecture and Sarah remembered his words: “Fiction is bits and pieces of experience, candy coated with imagination.” That appealed to Sarah; she’d been exaggerating and embroidering her adventures for years. Anything for a laugh. She’d learned that trick from her father. “Telling a story straight out isn’t funny, Sarah. Embellishing an ordinary event is what gets the audience every time.” Bart had repeated his colorful stories to hundreds of people. If Sarah wrote a book about him, she could tell his stories and he’d have an audience of thousands.

Back in her apartment by 7:00 P.M., Sarah emptied her suitcase and sorted her clean and dirty clothes. She gathered up the pages she’d written the past week, placed them in a fresh manila folder, and labeled it THE BOOK, before she jammed it into her desk file.

She shivered and wondered why she felt chilled. This apartment had seemed warm and inviting before she left for Santa Barbara; now it seemed cold and sterile.

After a week of new sights and sounds, new people and new ideas, it was difficult to readjust to lonely, empty rooms and lonely, empty nights.

The following week, working for Craig and finishing a commissioned painting, the tedium of survival had erased Sarah's euphoria and the writer's conference seemed like a distant memory.

At 4:00 A.M., and unable to sleep, she sat at the edge of her bed and thought she would die of loneliness. In disgust, she leaped to her feet and turned on every light in the apartment. She was fed up with allowing loneliness to destroy her zest for life.

Sarah fastened a leather belt around her nightie to hoist up the hem, filled a bucket with hot water and suds, and on her hands and knees she washed the kitchen and the bathroom floors. She dusted all the nick-knacks in the living room, watered her plants, and by 6:00, she was vacuuming the living room carpet. She didn't give a damn if it disturbed her upstairs neighbors. Those two consistently kept their TV on until the wee hours and disturbed her sleep.

Back in bed by 6:30, Sarah covered her face with the sheet to block out the morning sun. She was drifting off when the couple upstairs pounded down the steps in retaliation for waking them. Living in a downstairs apartment left much to be desired. Exhaustion finally overtook her and she fell asleep. In her dream she raced from room to room in her Vanderville home, searching for a clean towel.

CHAPTER 33

In mid-October, 1977, four of Sarah's constructions were juried into a group show at the L.A. Museum of Contemporary Art. The night of the opening she bumped into one of her "one-night stands." Delighted to see a familiar face, she marched confidently up to the "millionaire" who had wine and dined her in the luxury of his Beverly Hills home. Beaming, she said, "Hello, Alan. How are you?"

Alan looked past Sarah's shoulder and waved to a gorgeous blonde across the room. Then, with apparent lack of interest, he asked, "Have we met?"

A snake bite would have been less painful. Sarah turned on her heel, her face ashen, and escaped to the ladies room. Ten minutes later she found the courage to review her work but, unwilling to shake hands with any more strangers — or old lovers — she left the festivities feeling worthless.

At home Sarah dialed Gloria's number. It wasn't her turn, but she needed support and understanding. Glo answered on the first ring and said, "Hi, what's up? You never call this late."

"I'm beside myself and I can't stand one of me, let alone two! I met Alan at the opening and he acted as if he'd never laid eyes on me before."

"I'll bet he remembered you all right. He just didn't want to get involved. So what's the big deal? I didn't feel rejected when Jack didn't ask me for a second go-round. I knew where he was coming from — he wanted to try my style. I'm a realist. A pragmatist. It saves me a lot of pain. "I don't understand you, Sarah. You're strong in so many areas. But with men, your behavior is self-destructive. Your misery keeps you locked up in a deep drawer of that educated mind of yours."

“It’s not my fault the men I choose reject me. Is it? Am I self-destructive?”

“If you don’t understand, I can’t explain it. Have you ever considered starting therapy again?”

“I don’t have money for that.”

“Well, next time I see you, I’ll give you my therapist’s card; just in case you change your mind. A divorce can shatter you in a lot of ways.”

“You seem to have a good sense of who you are. You don’t sleep around.”

“Doesn’t Jack count? He was a ‘one night stand.’ I’m not a romantic like you. I see who the man is and where he’s coming from *before* I sleep with him, *not after*.”

“Damn it, Glo, sex is my only escape — I don’t drink, I don’t gamble — the only time my brain isn’t racing is when I’m in bed with someone. The only time I’m happy is when I’m making love or art.”

“Have you ever considered that you might be addicted to sex, like I’m addicted to chocolate?”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never seen you eat a chocolate bar or indulge in a hot fudge sundae.”

“I’m as intimate with my chocolate as you are with men. Alone at night I eat. I can devour a whole box of chocolate covered creams between midnight and 1:00 A.M. How do you think I got this broad ass?”

“I didn’t.”

“You’re more accepting than I am. You accept people I wouldn’t consider giving the time of day, like that Ralph character.”

Ignoring Glo’s dig, Sarah asked, “Are you seeing a shrink because you indulge in chocolate?”

“It’s more than indulge. It’s like I can’t stop myself. Sure, I see my therapist for that, and lots of other reasons. Do you think you’re the only one with problems? Does anything *besides* sex give you pleasure?”

“Sure, reading a good book, arranging flowers, watching a sunset, swimming, sunning at the beach. Hey, tomorrow’s Sunday, how about meeting me at Venice Beach?”

“Why would I drive to Venice when I have a beach practically outside my door? Anyway, I can’t leave the house tomorrow. If I don’t clean up this pit, Blythe won’t be able to find her bedroom.”

“What a pleasure, still living in your own home—divorced or not. I miss my house.” Sarah signed and added, “But I sure don’t miss the responsibility. I can give this apartment a ‘hit and a miss’ in less than an hour.”

“Lucky you.”

“Yeah, sure! Talk to you soon. Bye.”

Sarah hung up the phone feeling empty and misunderstood. Sex addict—what did Glo know! She walked to the dresser and removed a new bathing suit from the drawer; determined to go to Venice Beach in the morning. Alone.

In the bathroom she slowly undressed and perused her body in the full-length mirror. She tried several poses, twisting to see her behind in the mirror. Investigating her figure had become a new pastime. Sarah couldn’t fathom why men found her desirable. The fact that she was beautiful completely escaped her.

She fingered the long scar on her stomach. The damn doctors mutilated her, why the hell shouldn’t she use it for pleasure? She ran her finger tips down the side of her neck and cupped her palm over the roundness at the top of her arm. Bob used to kiss her shoulder and murmur, “Your skin is so soft, and you smell so good.” Bob had “owned” Sarah’s body. She never had.

Sarah was only aware of the body parts below her neck when she made love, sometimes not even then. A man could nibble on her breast, while her mind drifted to some niggling concern: Had she left a cigarette burning in an ashtray? Had she blown out the candles in the living room? Had her make-up smeared? With a new lover, Sarah wore make-up to bed.

At the point of orgasm, Sarah's mind would quiet and she'd feel rather than think. The touch of fire would ignite, and she'd be lost in the moment.

In the morning, Sarah slipped into her new multicolored bikini, pulled her jeans on, grabbed an oversized Turkish towel, and headed for Venice Beach. The traffic was light at 10:00 and she found a parking space in front of a drugstore. She dashed inside, grabbed prepackaged cheese and crackers, a Baby Ruth, and a *Times*. She stuffed her purchases in her straw carry-all and drove on to Venice.

By 11:00, the sun was already high and brilliant. How splendid to be walking across warm sand in mid-October, rather than sorting out winter clothes in Vanderville, Sarah thought, as she laid out her towel near the water's edge and dropped her jeans. She looked down at her scar peeking out above her bikini bottom and smiled at her daring; the nerve of her wearing such a revealing suit.

She glanced at her flat stomach and curvaceous hips; this suit didn't cover much more than the boy's bathing trunks Elizabeth had insisted she wear up until the age of eight. Sarah wondered if wearing boy's trunks had confused her gender identity. Was that when she decided the mind was superior to the body? Or had Sarah learned to dislike her femininity when Elizabeth put her to bed stark naked for some minor infraction of the rules. Four-year-old Sarah would slip out of bed and Elizabeth would scold, "Get back in that bed immediately, Sarah Mindel, you're a bad girl. And stay there until I say you can get out. Hurry, you wouldn't want anyone to see you without your clothes on."

Sarah lay face down on the towel, her scars hidden temporarily. She folded her arms under her forehead and turned her face to the sun; her body momentarily quieted, but not her mind. Sex addict? Just how many lovers had she slept with since her divorce? She counted on her fingers, name by name, amazed that she'd slept with more men than the young artist she'd met at Penland. She'd had more zip-less fucks than she cared to remember.

No wonder Peggy fell off the bed laughing hysterically when Sarah asked, “Are some men better in bed than others?” She thought Peggy was a tramp because she’d had five lovers by the time she was twenty-three. Sarah had broken Peggy’s record in less than a year. From prude to promiscuous—well, not quite, Sarah still remembered their names. The doctor didn’t count.

“When a woman is interested, every man in the room knows it.” That’s what Jack said. Sarah didn’t have the foggiest notion how she sent messages that she was available; but men congregated around her like bears in search of honey. Like the bank manager who walked up to her as she waited in line for a teller. “Come on over to my desk” he whispered. “I’ll take care of you. You’re far too pretty to stand in line with these yahoos.”

Sarah had been standing in line for ten minutes and her feet hurt; she obediently followed the bank manager to his corner desk. She handed over Bob’s check and said, “Cash, please.” The banker, eyeing Sarah with lust, pointed to his gold banded watch and asked, “How do you like this?”

Polite, as usual, Sarah said, “It’s beautiful.”

“Well, it’s yours if you’ll let me come over to your place.”

Sarah declined that offer and changed banks. She never wanted to bump into that creep again.

Rolling over, Sarah sat up and hugged her knees. She watched a seagull swooping low over the offshore waves and wondered why men swooped over her for sex. All she wanted was a man’s attention and love.

A man, strolling along the shoreline, waved to Sarah and she ignored him; her mind on a poem she remembered:

Here’s the woman of Babylon, the Devil and
the Pope, and here’s the little girl,
just going on the rope.

Sarah felt bedeviled; a lost child trapped in a woman's body. Half the time, after sex, she felt suicidal. She was aware she wasn't the first or last divorcee to sleep around, but she felt too guilty to enjoy it. When a new man gave her the eye, she felt like a femme fatale. When she awoke in the morning and found a stranger in her bed, she felt worse than a tramp. At least a call-girl would have cashed in. Sarah never accepted gifts or money; no one but Jack and Ralph ever offered to buy her so much as an ice cream cone.

Rising to her feet, Sarah covered her straw bag with her towel and then strolled along the shore. She picked up a small rose tinted sea glass and remembered the millionaire's swimming pool in a natural setting, surrounded by mammoth rose tinted boulders. She frowned remembering Alan's snub at the museum show. He hadn't acknowledged even knowing her, let alone the fact that they'd slept together.

* * *

The pastel blue silk sheet under Sarah polished her bare skin as she slowly awakened in a king-size bed. The early morning light cast shadows on the ceiling, and she played with them until she recognized a woman wearing a tiara and a bald headed man with a long beard. Sarah could find faces in shadows, clouds, even patterned linoleum.

She arched her neck up and back and could see the Liechtenstein painting on the bedroom wall above and behind her. The image was distorted from her awkward position, but she recognized the painting with the huge boobs. The vivid reds and blues seemed to vibrate in the sunlight. She turned her face to the right and looked at an original Picasso. His cubist period, she thought, as her eyes moved to investigate the Giacometti drawing next to it. She laid quietly, absorbed in the art and awed by the fact that they were all originals.

Last night the sunken marble bathtub in the bedroom had amazed and delighted her, but it had been too dim to appreciate the art display—even if she'd had the time. Alan had kept her too busy.

Sarah closed her eyes and replayed the events of the previous night. Alan's kitchen had been as large as a restaurant's; he'd created the best omelet she'd ever tasted on one of the two oversized stoves. He filled the egg mixture with avocado, bacon, and cheese. Sarah didn't know whether it was the food that pleased her so much or the fact that a man had prepared a meal just for her. She munched her buttered toast, nibbled at her omelet, and sipped champagne while they talked of art and artists.

By midnight they were curled up in front of the fire in the living room, listening to the Firebird suite on the stereo and discussing why abstract expressionism had died so quickly. Periodically Alan would jump to his feet and grab an art book from his wall-to-wall bookshelves to emphasize a point. Alan's books on art were more extensive than any collection Sarah had ever seen in a library.

A grunt jarred Sarah's reverie and she turned toward the man whose bed she shared. One thin, knobby kneed leg extended out and over the summer-weight pastel blue wool blanket. Alan's complexion looked yellow in the sunlight. Last night when he'd asked Sarah to spend the night, she'd been seduced by the art talk, the art books, and the artifacts in the living room, not by the man. Now she looked at Alan's sleeping face and realized he'd had a face-lift—the smooth skin on his cheeks didn't match his wrinkled neck. Why not? If Alan had the money for everything else, why not eternal youth? Sarah bet he'd had a nose job, too, and wondered why the plastic surgeon had overlooked his neck.

Last night Alan, clothed in tight brown slacks and a beige cashmere sweater, had looked about forty and Sarah was pleased that he was a contemporary—not too young or too old. Now, as he slipped out of bed and stood in front of the oversized mirror on its Victorian brass stand, Sarah had a clear view of his wrinkled butt, sagging stomach, and defenseless penis. He looked like a caricature from a Bosch painting.

In the dark, age had no meaning and Alan's body knew what to do. His performance had been spectacular. Sarah had lost count of how many times he'd brought

her to orgasm. She finally understood why she'd only "come" once with Bob—his love making was over as fast as it began.

Alan prepared a bountiful breakfast: pancakes, hot syrup, bacon, sausage, and fresh fruit. They ate their meal on the terrace overlooking the pool. He answered the poolside phone before he'd had time to pour their second cup of coffee. Sarah overheard his side of the conversation: "Yes, I do have a Monet, but it's a small one. I'll have to check my sources to find you a 7 x 11. What's your limit? Well, \$600,000 is a bit low, especially since you want me to find one that's predominantly blue."

Sarah couldn't believe what she heard. Someone wanted to purchase a \$600,000 painting, sight unseen, and ordered it by color like some Vanderville housewife who wanted to match the painting to the carpet.

When Alan hung up, Sarah asked him if he were a gallery dealer or a curator. "Both," he replied.

* * *

Sarah strolled back to her towel, fingering the periwinkle shell she'd collected. Alan was a dealer all right. He might have more money than the average man, but he was no better than the rest. Sarah was beginning to think all men were bastards at heart.

She laid on her back on the towel, one arm over her eyes to shield them from the noon sun. She'd slept with a rich man, a poor man . . . doctor . . . lawyer. Well, no beggars or thieves, at least not yet. Unconsciously Sarah twisted her neck from side to side several times, then rolled over on her stomach. She felt unloved and lonely, even on the crowded beach. She'd loathed women who were cheap and easy like Lorraine. Had she become one of them? She'd been trained to say yes. Would she ever learn to say no?

Why were sexually active men called "studs," a favorable comment, while a woman with the same instinct was called loose or worse? Did prostitutes enjoy sex? Did they feel powerful because they were paid for their efforts?

"Be quiet and do what you're told!" a mother berated her daughter, and Sarah, overhearing, felt empathy for the child. "I said stop your crying!" How often Sarah had

heard those same words from her mother. Forced to follow Elizabeth's directives, no wonder Sarah had difficulty saying no.

Sarah wanted love but settled for sex. A guilty conscience labeled her "sinner" and she felt shame at her behavior. This sexing around had to stop. Mulling over Gloria's suggestion to see a therapist, Sarah dismissed it. Her other friends had assured her that casual sex was more than okay.

Racing down to the water, Sarah grabbed a handful of pebbles and hurled them into the ocean with vehemence, convinced she was destined for hell if she didn't change her conduct. Why couldn't she just relax and enjoy her sex life? After all, she was one of the lucky women over forty who had a choice.

In fact, when she slept with Jack, she felt a pleasurable wickedness sleeping with a man before her divorce. It was her way of repaying Bob for his infidelities. Later sex became an experiment, and Sarah was convinced that after she'd sewn her wild oats, she could return to Bob with a better understanding of his affairs. Now she had sewn enough oats for several women and there was no way to return to Bob.

Sarah walked back to her towel, dropped to her knees, and settled back down on her stomach. She dozed off and on until 3:00 P.M. Then she gathered up her straw carry-all, towel and jeans, and fast toed across the burning sand. On the boardwalk, she dusted off her sandy legs, slipped into her jeans, brushed off her feet and pushed her way back into her tennis shoes, not bothering to tie the laces until she reached the car.

At home Sarah rinsed out her bikini and hung it over the open glass door of the shower, then changed her mind and put it back in the sink and stepped into the shower herself. It was only 5:00 P.M. when she stepped out and rehung her bathing suit, but she pulled a nightie over her head, rather than redress. She rubbed hand lotion on her arms and admired the color of her bronzed skin. Her rosy cheeks pleased her. Booze would have given her a red nose and a pasty complexion. Drugs would have aged her. Sex gave her good color and all that exercise kept her figure trim.

Sarah fixed a light dinner—a tuna salad sandwich and a glass of milk—and then settled down in bed. She had planned to read the *Times* at the beach, but her thoughts had kept her too busy. Now she turned the pages slowly, skimming the headlines until she reached the art reviews. The headline TO ACT IS TO LOVE captured her attention and she reacted with wild excitement when she saw her name in print below the headline.

Sarah Shallot's constructions exhibit have an R.D. Lange rationale. The work reminded me of the woman who went to a psychiatrist because she liked pancakes. The psychiatrist assured her that he liked pancakes, too.

"You do," she replied, "you must come and visit me some time. I have two trunkfuls in the attic."

Shallot's exhibit of six assemblages is a nostalgic trip into never-never land. Particularly successful was one construction entitled, "Fairy Tales Aren't Just for Children (Myth you since you went away)." For Victorian buffs who adore turn-of-the-century valentines, postcards, cupids, and other memorabilia, Shallot's exhibit will enchant.

Shallot also exhibits a sense of humor. Two feet away from the Fairy Tale box I viewed an upside-down black jewel box lined in puffs of gold satin. In the center a fake diamond bracelet sparkled and I thought, so what? Upon closer examination, I found the stone in the center of the bracelet was not a diamond but a half-inch square of hand blown glass and the four letter word CUFF as Eric Berne's reverse language would have it, printed in the glass.

This must come from Ms. Shallot's effing period. From this viewer's perspective, the message is that diamonds are still a girl's best friend.

Art must be judged on its own terms. Shallot's "Statement by the Artist" that accompanied her work is all about words. Visual verbiage at

that! Tautology or not, don't miss this exhibit of Sarah Shallot's. Her work adds a whole new dimension to the meaning of the word, "surreal."

What a review! Recognition at last; Sarah was jubilant. This critic understood. Sarah would Xerox the review and mail copies to Louise, Mona, Natalie, and anyone else she could think of. She wouldn't bother sending a copy to Elizabeth. No way would she risk criticism, she'd waited a long time for this kind of validation; tangible proof that she wasn't wasting her life pursuing an art career.

In the morning Sarah stumbled out of bed bleary eyed, the joy of last night forgotten. She felt like over-ripe fruit: still sweet, soft to the touch, on the verge of decay.

* * *

Bart uncorked a magnum of champagne and ducked as the cork popped to the ceiling in a fizzing explosion. He filled Sarah's glass and one for El. Throughout dinner, he refilled his glass and Sarah's.

"Bart, stop filling her glass," Elizabeth complained. "She's only a baby."

"I'm not a baby, Mom . . . Hic . . . I'm almost seventeen."

"Shh, El, I know what I'm doing. Come on, Baby, you're way behind me. Drink up."

The bubbles tickled Sarah's nose but she matched Bart drink for drink. After dinner she had a hard time standing up and she zigzagged a silly pattern into the den. Bart didn't stagger as he followed close at her heels.

"Daddy, look at that silly Christmas tree. It's as sagging and hopeless as the one you brought home last year." And the year before; Bart always purchased the least expensive tree. He'd say, "It looks good to me. Besides, what difference does it make. In another week it'll be out in the alley with all the rest. Only a damn fool would waste his money on something that's already dead."

Sarah reached for one of the glistening ornaments and hurled it to the floor as the tree swayed one way and she swayed another. The holiday decoration cracked as it landed and Sarah ground the shards into the carpet with her heel. “Boy, oh boy—if I had a boy here, boy what I’d do,” she giggled.

Bart’s laughter instantly changed to a snarl. He grabbed Sarah by the lapels of her blouse, pushed his face close to hers and growled, “Do you see what a fool you’re making of yourself? Don’t ever drink! Now go wash your face and go to bed.”

He turned to El and said, “I told you I knew what I was doing.”

* * *

That was one of her father’s better lessons, Sarah thought, as she walked to the typewriter determined to capture the scene before she forgot it. She typed for ten minutes, then laid the typed pages next to the machine. She giggled as she twirled in a fresh 8 x 11 sheet and punched the keys. She’d learned a few lessons on her own.

A man with a penis as large or larger than six inches is a *stud*. This hedonistic species sees their purpose in life as “we serve.” They are not interested in protecting.

Men with a penis five inches or less may or may not be good lovers. Their ability depends on their background. Foreign men and poets make up for their size deficiency by their developed sensitivity.

Black men definitely have the advantage in bedroom games. It is not a myth. Black men know their strengths; they are not threatened by a woman’s sexuality. Is that why Caucasian men prefer prejudice? To cover their own lack of virility?

Policemen have a hard time getting it up. They wear guns on their hips as a symbol and substitute.

Recently divorced men are as vulnerable as women. They call all the time. If they could bake a cherry pie for you, they would.

Young men like to experience an older woman. They will fantasize this adoration until the act is consummated. Bachelors and those divorced over six years have learned

the art of self-sufficiency. Their strength and power are superficial. They nourish women. If the women respond, the men disappear. Intimacy is a threat, commitment a death sentence.

Artists have tender, loving hands and soft skin. They are rich in sensitivity and their wallets are empty.

Men, recently divorced, have lost a lot of weight. You can tell. They wear a ring on their middle finger. Outrageous clothes and gold jewelry look ludicrous on a man of fifty. These men are jogging along past their prime.

Businessmen work long hours. They are exhausted. Sex once a week is all they can handle. They need to be nourished. You need to be satisfied.

Millionaires are as sexy as poor men. Middle-class men rarely kiss you on the first date. The rich and the poor grab you at first sight, and you end up in bed on the first night. The rich are used to getting what they want. The poor can't afford to treat you to a movie.

Men who fix you English muffins in the middle of the night usually go to massage parlors. They have mother fixations so they can't handle a normal sex partner.

Adventurers, beach bums and the like, are tanned all year round. They summer at the beach, ski in winter, and in rainy weather they gamble in Las Vegas. Bums make a woman feel like a *woman*. They say, "You have a luscious, voluptuous body" to a woman built like a twelve-year-old boy. They promise dinners in the future that never materialize. You will receive postcards from the Alps and from Atlantic City, but you'll never see the bum again.

Men with a Saturday-night woman and a Wednesday-night girl have a wife and a mistress, although they are unmarried. The Wednesday-night girl cooks dinner and cleans up the dishes. She listens to 'her man' complain and consoles him for his failures. The Saturday-night woman gets the dessert; a beautiful apartment and a night on the town.

The divorced woman has entered a new role, where no rules are posted. So, sisters, tread lightly before you roll over in bed and face your latest disaster. And remember, don't laugh in his face.

Sarah sat at the typewriter pondering a title. Then she rolled in a fresh sheet of paper and typed in capital letters: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE MEN I'VE SLEPT WITH. A DIVORCEE'S GUIDE, BY IMA FREEWOMAN. Sarah smiled as she counted the pages, grinned as she tucked them into her writing file, and laughed as she changed her mind and retrieved them. Plunking down on the bean bag to reread the pages, she thumbed them with reverence. "If you could write the way you talk — with your wit — you'd produce a best seller," Jack had said. But he was a good friend, wasn't that why he gave Sarah outrageous compliments? Who was he kidding? He didn't know about Sarah's bulging writing file; no one did. Sarah, privy to other people's secrets, kept hers well hidden. The typewriter had become her best friend and confidante.

Sarah had been writing vignette's since she was twelve. Recently she'd come across a diary she'd kept at camp. There were descriptions of all her cabin mates, the cabin counselor, and a ten-year-old boy she had a crush on. She'd written a description of the fire in the craft house, and had wrapped cinders in tissue and tucked the "package" between the pages. Sarah had never shared that or anything else she'd written until the afternoon she'd risked showing the B-girl pages to Shirley. At the writer's conference, she was amazed at the approval she received. Lighting another cigarette, she ruminated on why she was willing to risk rejection as an artist but not as a writer. She rubbed the back of her head and remembered an incident from long ago.

* * *

Mr. Sivas, the high school Freshman English teacher, assigned the class a writing project and advised, "Write about something you've experienced. Only a paragraph or two, but the assignment is due tomorrow."

After school that day, Sarah tried out for the swimming team. She passed the crawl, the breast stroke, the backstroke, and the butterfly with flying colors. Then the coach asked her to dive off the board. She never dived in her life, but was too embarrassed to admit it. So, with her heart pounding, she climbed the steps to the diving board, stretched her arms over her head, and smacked into the water horizontally. Her body was covered with red marks that stung as she swam to the pool ladder and climbed out, relieved that the ordeal was over.

The coach called out, “Okay, Mindel, so you goofed, no big deal! You really know how to swim so I’m going to give you another crack at a dive.”

Crack, that’s just what she’d do, crack up her body. But she climbed the steps again and stood shaking at the end of the diving board. Again she stretched her arms over her head and fell head-long into the water. The water felt like concrete the way she landed, and she rose to the surface, her nose filled with water and gasping for breath.

The coach dismissed her. “Sorry, Mindel, I would have liked you on the team, but you don’t know a darn thing about diving. Practice, and try again next year.” Sarah never did. At Monticello she mastered the back flip off the board by practice, practice, practice. She never accomplished a swan dive, no matter how hard she tried.

By the time Sarah changed back into her school clothes and headed for the long walk home, the sun was low in the sky. She was moved by the beauty of the sunset and the green flash that would be missed if she blinked her eyes. As the sun disappeared below the horizon, she determined to write about the sunset for her English assignment.

That night she wrote two paragraphs about the magnificent sunset and turned in her assignment the next day, hoping she’d receive an A. She thought what she’d written was darn good. When the papers were returned several days later, she was shocked to see a D at the top of the page. As shy as she was, she stayed after class and asked Mr. Sivas why he had given her a poor grade.

“Because you plagiarized, that’s why!”

“What does plagiarize mean?”

“It means, stupid, that you copied that sunset piece out of a book and tried to pass it off as your own. You get a D, and that’s that. Do your own work from now on.”

* * *

No wonder Sarah was a closet writer. That bastard, and he called himself a teacher!

Well, poor speller or not, the next time Jack showed up at her door, Sarah was going to let him read her sociological study and see how he reacted to her “worldly” approach. When she did finally ask him to read it, she was thrilled by Jack’s response and felt encouraged when he said, “You *can* write the way you talk. Go for it.”

Sarah hid her pleasure and replied, “I don’t have time, Jack. I’m too busy hopping in and out of bed.”

“That’s not funny. Okay, you’ve proved to yourself that you are a desirable woman. Now, find yourself a steady lover, then you’ll have time to write.”

“God, Jack, I wish I could.”

CHAPTER 34

Sarah stepped back from her easel, paintbrush held lengthwise across her lips, her mind focused on a problem. A yellow cotton scarf held her bangs off her brow, her forehead a patterned frown of concentration as she searched for a solution. Painting to order offended her sense of art as invention; she loathed commissioned work.

She rinsed her paintbrush, swirling the bristles in a water-filled fruit can. She dabbed the wet brush into the China white on her pallet, splashed the acrylic paint across the surface of the painting and moaned. If she didn't need the money, she'd throw the damn canvas in the garbage.

The doorbell chimed and interrupted Sarah's single-minded concentration. Resentful, she soaked her paint brush in water and walked slowly to the front door, rather than running at a trot as she usually did. If it was Richard, she'd get rid of him. The "painting" had to be finished before the end of the month. She was busy, even if he wasn't.

Sarah's thoughts remained at her easel while she opened the front door. A tall black man stood on the cement landing, his features blurred by bright sunlight. Instantly alert — living in the ghetto had taught Sarah caution — she shielded her eyes with her hand and squinted. As her eyes adjusted, she asked hesitantly, "Ralph?"

"Yeah, it's me. I would have called first, but I was afraid you'd hang up when you heard my voice."

Sarah stared at her former lover without moving. Then she backed slowly away from the door, filled with uncertainty as she asked, "How did you find me?"

"Jack gave me your address. I need to talk to you. Can I come in?"

She waved her hand in a "come in" gesture and backed further into the room without a verbal reply or a smile. Ralph followed her inside and closed the door behind him. He walked across the room, stood beside a chair, and asked, "Can I sit down?"

Sarah nodded permission and Ralph sat on the edge of the chair without leaning back. “I’ve really missed you,” he said, with a serious expression on his face. “I’ve had your phone number for months but I was afraid to call.” He sucked in his breath and half whispered, “Please give me another chance. I know I took you for granted, didn’t appreciate you enough, but I knew how much you meant to me when you hung up and refused to speak to me.”

Arms akimbo in defiance, Sarah stood looking down at Ralph and said, “So?”

“You’re so honest, Sarah, I had to be honest with myself and I just couldn’t handle it. That’s why I wanted to split in the first place. It’s hard to be honest about your own behavior, but I have . . .”

Sarah folded her arms across her breasts, her features softening as Ralph said, “I’ve stopped drinking and I’m studying hard. Now that I’ve stopped boozing, my former so-called friends don’t want anything to do with me. Do you?” he asked, as he held out his arms to her. “I’m sorry I hurt you, honest I am. Come sit on my lap and tell me you’ll take me back.”

Like a sleepwalker Sarah crossed the room and sat tentatively, sideways, on Ralph’s knees. He sat back on the chair as he enclosed her in his arms and she nuzzled into his massive chest. He gently removed her yellow scarf and kissed the top of her head and she was filled with amazement that Ralph had searched for her a second time. She sat up and looked into his eyes. He kissed her tenderly on the lips and she returned his kiss, then pulled away, stood up, and backed away.

“No,” she said, “let’s talk. What do you have in mind?”

“I promise I’ll treat you better this time.” Ralph said. “My GI check just arrived. Give me another kiss and I’ll take you out for lunch and when we get back, I’ll drag that mattress out of this living room and . . .”

After lunch, the paint brush still soaked in water as Ralph shoved studio equipment to one side of the back bedroom. He reassembled the metal bed frame in the

vacated corner, placed the relatively new box spring on the inner ledge, then hoisted the mattress on top.

By 3:00 P.M. that sunny Saturday afternoon, Ralph and Sarah were in bed and his velvet smooth lips flicked and licked every smoothness of Sarah's body. His tongue darted in and out of her. All over. He tickled her clitoris with the tip of his tongue and she moaned. Only an angel could kiss like that.

She lay on her back, absorbing Ralph's tongue for what seemed like eternity, until she moaned, "Now. Now," and he guided her resilient form, entered her and pressed his chest against her breasts, his lips crushed to hers. Together their movements matched in a fiery dance and they exploded together. When Ralph smiled over her and whispered, "Come big again," she did.

Sarah lay quietly in her lover's arms until, aroused once more, he rolled back on top of her. Like an accomplished skater, he figure-eighted his way to completion and moaning, yelps of pleasure pouring from his lips, he collapsed atop her. Ralph weighed over two hundred pounds, yet his muscled body felt weightless to Sarah as he whispered in her ear, "I love you, Baby."

Then Ralph rolled Sarah on top of him and she danced into another intense climax and toppled down into his waiting arms. She sighed with release and contentment and murmured, "I love you, too, Ralph." The mismatched couple—in age and race—matched perfectly in sexual energy, and Sarah recalled the old cliché, "exploding like firecrackers" with a new meaning.

Still connected and whispering, they lay side-by-side, Ralph's milk chocolate arm curled over Sarah's vanilla stomach as he murmured, "I'm so happy you took me back, Baby. I really do love you." She wanted to believe him, yet she felt doubtful. Shirl's words kept ringing in her ears: "Never believe anything you hear on a pillow."

"What I need, Ralph, is more than sex," she said without looking at him. "What I need is someone to really care for me."

Ralph pulled Sarah closer to him, patted her hand gently, and whispered with genuine feeling, “You have someone now. I really love you, munchkin, and I promise I’ll take care of you from now on.”

Sarah held her breath as she listened to Ralph’s words of endearment. She’d waited so long to hear a man say, “I love you,” and mean it.

In the weeks that followed, life became a pattern of Ralph and work, work and Ralph. No longer was Sarah available on Saturday nights for a movie or dinner with Shirl, and Shirley, feeling deprived — her latest lover had moved across the country to New York — threw digs at Sarah’s renewed relationship with Ralph.

“Aren’t you just being rebellious?” she asked. “Your lover is black and so is your best male friend. What’s with you?”

“My rebellion, as you call it, was after my divorce when I slept with strangers. Ralph is no stranger; color has nothing to do with love and understanding. Ralph and I are like any other couple, we argue about who takes out the garbage and then make up in bed.”

Shirley, barely thirty, with a knock-out figure, slept around more than Sarah had, yet she felt superior because her lovers were professionals and white, while Ralph was black and a student. “You’re too good for him, Sarah. Why don’t you give yourself a break? I’ll fix you up with one of my old boyfriends.”

“Forget it.” Why the hell would Sarah want to date one of Shirl’s cast-offs? Shirley must be nuts to suggest it. “Shirl, give me a break. You’ll connect with someone soon, you always do. Then you won’t pick on Ralph.”

At the end of October, Ralph suggested a trip to Las Vegas and Sarah declined saying, “I don’t gamble. Besides, where would we get the money?”

“A weekend in Las Vegas is dirt cheap. The house makes up for the low room rentals with what’s dropped at the blackjack tables. It’ll be fun. Say yes. Besides, I sold my Jeep, I was fed up with those high monthly payments and now I have some extra

bread. I've been checking ads, and we can get the best deal at Circus-Circus. We'll take your car, I'm temporarily without wheels, and . . ."

"And how did you get here today?"

"I borrowed my brother-in-law's car, but he won't lend it to me to drive to Las Vegas. I'll drive your car, and give you gas money for both ways—up front—in case I lose my shirt gambling." Ralph laughed, then assured Sarah he was "lucky at cards." He knew he'd be a rich man when he returned to L.A. "And then, Baby, I'll take you out on the town. I'll buy you furs and diamonds, and . . ."

Sarah cracked up laughing. "Sure!" she said, "And we'll have a black and white wedding; I'll wear a black dress, and you'll wear a white tux, and we'll honeymoon in Jamaica, where the only prejudice we'll feel is the fact that I'm Jewish."

"You are? You never mentioned it before."

"There's lots of things I haven't mentioned."

Ralph grinned, looked into Sarah's eyes and said mock-seriously, "You're a Jew and I'm black, we'll never make it!" and with laughter in their eyes and on their lips, they both doubled over until their eyes teared.

Feeling lighthearted, Sarah acquiesced saying, "Oh, what the hell. Why not? A weekend out of L.A. will be good for what ails me. When do we leave?"

How weird; Sarah loved a black man and was planning a weekend in a cheap Las Vegas hotel while Bob was married to a woman who said, "nigger" and meant it. How ironic that Lorraine and Bob vacationed every year in Jamaica. Caneel Bay was definitely more expensive than the Circus-Circus.

Ralph and Sarah spent the rest of the weekend discussing their upcoming trip; what they'd pack, how much money they'd need, and what time they'd depart. Sunday night after Ralph left, Sarah wrote down figures on a notepad, budgeting her share of the meals. She added \$5.00 for the slots. She would *not* spend one penny more. After checking her bank balance, she decided \$60.00 in cash would more than cover her share of the expenses.

The morning of their departure, the following weekend, Sarah tucked \$75.00 into her change purse and felt rich. By 10:00 on Friday they were exiting the freeway, with Ralph at the wheel of her car. They headed into the desert on a two-lane highway, giggling over nothing like two teenagers. Sarah watched tumbleweeds roll across the flat landscape and was happy she'd made the decision to weekend away from L.A. An hour into the desert, the Pontiac began to shake and vibrate and her good mood changed.

The car rumbled and rolled from side to side. She was grateful Ralph was driving as the Pontiac, almost out of control, swerved away from an oncoming car and two wheels dug into the dirt siding. Ralph turned off the ignition, jumped out of the car, and set a warning light, he'd wisely packed, below the tail lights. Then he opened the hood, poked his nose inside, checked the water and oil, and in disgust, slammed the hood shut. He slid back behind the wheel and announced, "I don't know what the hell's wrong, but we'd better drive slow and hunt for a gas station and hope to God there's a mechanic on duty."

Ralph drove at ten miles an hour until they spotted an off- the-road gas station. He drove in and parked the car near the opened service doors. Sarah left Ralph to deal with the attendant while she removed the restroom key from a hook inside the office. Minutes later she replaced the key, walked to the car, and overheard the mechanic say, "You need four new shock absorbers. It'll cost a couple of hundred bucks to replace them. *If* I have the parts."

"Check and see if you do," Ralph replied. Unable to conceal her agitation, Sarah bit her lower lip and frowned. Ralph put his arm around her shoulder and in a comforting whisper said, "Don't worry, Baby, we'll split the cost. You pay for two and I'll pay for two. Give him your check and I'll give you cash for my share."

Ralph, parting with *his* money to fix Sarah's car? He must really love her. Shirley was wrong about Ralph; he wasn't trying to "get-over." Sarah had learned black jargon from Ralph and Jack; "getting-over" meant a good looking, young black buck having an affair with a white, older woman. Sarah wondered how Shirl knew that

expression. Maybe she'd been burned by a black lover, and that's why she gave Sarah a hard time. His liaison with Sarah wouldn't give him a boost out of the ghetto; she didn't have enough money to even tempt him. Sarah had never mentioned her cash settlement to Ralph. As far as he knew, she lived on the checks from Bob, the money she earned at work, and her commissioned art.

"Yeah, I got the parts," the mechanic yelled. "Drive her on in."

Ralph drove the Pontiac onto the hoist, climbed out, and watched the mechanic elevate the car and move under it with a wrench in his hand. Then he dropped coins in the Coke machine and removed two cans. He opened one for Sarah and handed it to her. They walked to the side of the station and sat down on the weed covered ground, killing time until the mechanic finally poked his head out the service door and yelled, "Okay, folks, she's all ready."

Back in the car, Ralph handed Sarah two fifty-dollar bills before he turned the key in the ignition. She leaned across the seat, kissed him on the cheek and said, "Thanks so very much, Honey."

Ralph gave her a shove and said, "Cut it out. Stop fussing at me!"

"What's your problem?"

"I can see in the rearview mirror, that jerk mechanic is grinning at us like he's got a squirrel up his ass."

"You have such a way with words," Sarah said as she slid across the seat away from him, slumped down and rested her head on the back of the seat.

"Stop pouting," Ralph said, as he eased the car back onto the two-lane road.

"We've killed enough time. I'm going to step on it."

"I'm not pouting," Sarah said, and sucked in her lower lip. "I'm taking a nap. Wake me up when we get there."

Dozing on and off for the next hour and a half, Sarah's head bobbed forward from time to time when Ralph put his foot on the brake, then jerking back she'd sleep again.

It was close to dinner time when Ralph parked in front of the Circus-Circus and touched Sarah's arm gently, "Wake up, Baby. We're here."

Sarah's eyes fluttered open and she said, "Give me a sec," and opened her cosmetic bag, powdered her nose and applied fresh lipstick. Then she ran a comb through her hair and said, "Okay, I'm ready. Let's go. By the way, how are you going to register us?"

"Mr. and Mrs. D — for dark — Browne! What-do-ya think!" Ralph laughed. He was in a great mood, despite the long hours of driving, and he hustled Sarah inside, eager to hit the blackjack tables.

Sarah remained near the entrance with the luggage while Ralph registered at the desk. The garish lobby offended her sensibilities and her nose wrinkled in distaste as she looked at the ceiling and walls of the lobby encased in a fake canvas big-top. Cardboard cutouts of trapeze artists and high-wire figures bombarded the eye and strained credibility. Big bellied men and slovenly women jostled for position as they pushed coin after coin in rows and rows of slot machines.

A man dressed in a clown costume, his mouth painted in a red over-sized smile, had eyes that looked as dead as the plastic elephant near the reception desk. The clown handed Sarah free chips for the craps game and a pass that read: "Free coffee with your breakfast in the Circus-Circus coffee-shop between 5 and 6 A.M." Sarah stuffed the freebies in her jacket pocket, knowing she'd never be awake early enough to redeem the coupon.

Ralph carried their luggage (both suitcases belonged to Sarah) to the elevator and grinning whispered, "See, we've saved the tip." They located their room on the third floor, and Ralph turned the key in the lock and held the door open for Sarah. She stepped inside and burst out laughing before Ralph had time to close the door. "No wonder they only charge \$10 a night!" she giggled, "This is the grossest, glitziest, most disgusting room I've ever seen in my life."

"Stop bitching. We won't be spending much time in here."

“Shucks,” Sarah mumbled as she slid a quarter into a slot and watched the queen-sized bed rock and roll. She fell backwards on the bed, not caring if her shoes soiled the wine stained spread. Under her weight the vibrating diminished, but she anticipated a night of frolic under the sheets.”

Ralph splashed cold water on his face, poked his wide tooth comb through his natural, changed into a clean shirt, and said, “Come on, stop goofing off. Let’s have a quick dinner and I’ll show you around.”

Sarah changed her blouse and shoes, redid her makeup, and in less than an hour they had finished eating — bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches — in the coffee shop and were at a gaming table. Ralph instructed Sarah on the rules of blackjack, and within minutes, with beginner’s luck, she had won over \$35.00. She tucked the money inside her change purse with a smile on her face and said, “Okay, now let’s go to bed.”

“Are you kidding? We just got here. You’ve been playing and I’ve been watching you. If you want to go to bed, fine, but I’m staying here awhile to test my luck.”

“Don’t be too long, Ralph,” Sarah whined and then headed for the elevator.

At 11:00 P.M. she heard Ralph’s key in the door and sat up in bed, running her fingers through her hair. “Mr. Lucky” came bounding into the room, threw \$200 in fives across the bed, and beaming with victory announced, “See, I told you I was lucky!”

Sarah grinned her approval. “Great,” she said. “With your money and my winnings, we can go to the MGM tomorrow night, have dinner and see the floor show. Should I make reservations for us in the morning?”

“Not for me. Make one for yourself. I’m not interested, I’ll spend my time getting rich at the blackjack table.”

Sarah concealed her disappointment as Ralph stripped down to his shorts and climbed into bed beside her. By the time she turned off the bedside lamp she could hear Ralph’s soft breathing and knew he was already asleep.

After a light breakfast of coffee and sweet rolls, they walked from one end of the strip to the other. While Ralph raved over the architecture of pseudo-Greek temples, fake Roman statues, and imitation Italian fountains, Sarah felt as sick to her stomach as she had when her father took her to the DOG HOUSE one hot summer afternoon. Las Vegas, she decided, was more decadent than any one of Bart's taverns, and far more materialistic. All this fakery and hokum depressed her.

An old-fashioned ice cream parlor appealed to Sarah and, after standing in line for five minutes, they were seated. Ralph ordered a club sandwich and Sarah ordered another BLT. They shared a side order of fries, and Sarah's features relaxed as she sipped another Coke. "What are we going to do this afternoon?" she asked.

"Gamble, of course, that's what we're here for."

That's why *you're* here, Sarah thought, as she wiped her paper napkin across her lips and excused herself to find the ladies room.

Ralph spent the afternoon playing roulette and blackjack, and Sarah wandered from slot machine to slot machine, putting a quarter in this one or that. As much as she thought she hated gambling, she had to admit it was exciting to hear coins bounce and clang in the payoff tray as the one-armed bandit stopped at three cherry's across. She collected her quarters, dropped them in her purse, located Ralph and said, "I've got to start getting ready for dinner."

"Okay, when you're ready, come find me here and I'll walk you down to the MGM."

At six-thirty Sarah, dressed in a lady-of-the-manor white sleeveless, linen sheath, with pearls around her neck, and high-heeled black patent slippers on her feet, found Ralph sitting in the same chair at the blackjack table. He rose, reluctantly, put his chips in his trouser pockets and said, "Okay, okay. Let's get a move on or you'll be late for the show." Sarah knew he didn't give a damn whether she was late or not, he just wanted to get back to his gambling.

In the MGM lobby, Ralph pecked Sarah's cheek and said, "You look mighty fine, Baby. See you later," and dashed out the revolving door, as if the sheriff were after him.

Sarah was pleasantly surprised when she was led to her table and seated next to the stage. Every other seat at the table was filled with couples already whiskey friendly. She wondered what the hell she was doing, dining alone in Las Vegas with a bunch of rowdy strangers.

The air conditioner was turned too high, and she wrapped her white cashmere cardigan (another relic from her past) over her shoulders and waited impatiently for dinner to be served. After a mediocre meal of dried and shriveled filet mignon, tasteless baked potatoes, half-baked at that, a wilted garden salad, and a glass of cheap champagne, Sarah regretted having spent her winnings on this adventure.

The house lights finally dimmed and Helen Reddy spotlighted onto center stage. She strolled back and forth across the boards singing into her hand-held mike and avoiding the cord. The spotlight followed her every move as she crooned and the crowd applauded. She ended her performance with her 1972 classic *I Am Woman* and knelt at the front of the stage and reached for Sarah's outstretched hand. Then the "star" rose to her feet, sang another chorus of *I Am Woman*, pointed to Sarah and said, "And so are you!" and the audience roared their delight.

They clapped their hands, cheered, and stomped their feet while Helen Reddy bowed, and then sang two encores. Sarah listened to the applause as if it were meant for her, and understood the thrill her father must have experienced when he belted out *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.

The floor show ended and the audience looked weary in the bright glare of the house lights. Sarah squeezed past idlers, eager to see Ralph and share her excitement. Ralph was impatiently waiting for her in the lobby and when she rushed up to him, filled with enthusiasm, he greeted her and asked, "Hey, Baby, did you have a good time?"

Before she could respond, he rushed her toward the revolving door. Outside Sarah rattled on about shaking hands with Helen Reddy and being acknowledged as a real

woman. Ralph rushed her down the sidewalk toward the Circus-Circus, mumbling, “Yeah, yeah, great. Now let’s get a move on. I was really *hot* at the blackjack table. I’m ahead \$500. I hated to leave, but I didn’t want you walking back to the hotel alone. There are a lot of crazies out here.”

Sarah’s disappointment that Ralph cared so little about her night’s adventure was softened by his caring enough to protect her from any toughs. She’d walked home alone in worse neighborhoods.

In their garish hotel room, Sarah readied herself for bed. She turned from the closet after hanging up her white linen dress and looked at Ralph who was tucking another clean shirt into his trousers. She faced him in her bra and half slip and asked, “Why are you changing your shirt when we’re going to bed?”

“You’re going to bed, Baby, not me! I’m spending the night at the crap table. I’m gonna have a real bundle by the time you wake up. And in the morning, Baby, I’ll treat us to a great breakfast at the Grand. Then I’ll take you into the gift shop and you can pick out anything you want.”

“I don’t want anything but you, Ralph. Why not call it a night. You said you’d won over \$500. Why not keep the cash and you’ll go home way ahead of the game?”

“Lay off, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ralph hissed, as he banged out the door without kissing her goodnight.

Sarah went to bed alone and lonely. She slept fitfully, and at 7:00 A.M. when Ralph entered the room, she was wide awake and waiting. She was surprised at his appearance. “Mr. Neatnik,” as she often teased him, looked disheveled, his shirt half in and half out of his trousers, his underarm’s stained with perspiration, beads of sweat bubbling on his forehead. He looked bleary eyed and chagrined as he announced, “I should have listened to you last night. I should have stayed with you. Now I’ve lost all my winnings and all my Jeep money. I won’t have a cent until my GI check arrives at the end of the month.”

“Never mind, Ralph,” Sarah consoled. “I’ve got enough cash to keep you from starving until your check arrives. Without gloating, she added, “I’m going home with more money than I arrived with.” Ralph winced and she apologized, “I didn’t mean to rub it in. Come on, clean up and I’ll treat us to a big breakfast before we check out.” They were in L-O-S-S Vegas, Sarah thought, but she knew better than to share her pun.

In the Circus-Circus coffee shop, it was too late to use the pass for free coffee, but they ordered scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, buttered toast, coffee for Ralph, and tea for Sarah. The meal cost less than if Sarah had purchased the food uncooked in an L.A. grocery store. If people came to Las Vegas and didn’t gamble, they could have a vacation on the cheap.

Ralph ate all of his breakfast and half of Sarah’s then, feeling better, he leaned back and watched her light a cigarette and didn’t complain as he usually did when she smoked.

He motioned to the waitress and she refilled his coffee cup. When she left the table, he leaned toward Sarah and whispered, “Did you see the way she looked at us? People have been staring at us since we arrived because I’m black and you’re white.”

“No, Ralph,” she whispered back, “they’re staring at us because you’re young and I’m old. You’re tall and I’m short.” The mismatched couple looked into each other’s eyes and laughed, but both knew they had each spoken the truth.

Ralph grinned deliciously and said wistfully, “I wish I were twenty years older, or you were twenty years younger.” Then he handed Sarah her car keys and said, “You’ll have to drive home, I’m too pooped to drive.”

The following Saturday Sarah filled her shopping cart with more than enough food for two weeks. She planned to send Ralph home on Sunday night with leftovers and enough fruit, crackers, and cheese to keep him supplied until his GI check arrived.

Sarah continued to please and serve Ralph, a repetition of her behavior with Bob and all her lovers since she’d left him. Some men tire of a needy woman, while others

dote on total obedience. Sarah wanted approval and demeaned herself in the process. Power given away is hard to redeem.

When Ralph called Sarah lazy for refusing to bring him a glass of water, she thought she heard Bob's voice. Ralph, like Bob, wanted complete control. Often, as not, Sarah complied and felt resentful but she overlooked Ralph's behavior when he folded her in his arms and whispered words of love and endearment. They had to be bedded for that kind of sentiment.

Sentiment aside, Ralph encouraged Sarah to date other men, and to please him she lied and said she did. One night he asked, "Of all the men you date, who's your favorite?"

"You are!" she answered and laughed to herself; he was the only man she "dated."

"I've answered your question, Ralph, now answer mine. Who is *your* favorite?"

"You are . . . because you understand me. If I ever meet anyone my age who understands me the way you do, I'll marry her."

The age reference stung, but Sarah concentrated on the words, "You're my favorite." When would Ralph have time to see anyone else? He spent every weekend with Sarah. Maybe he, too, was lying. It was the difference between Bob's lies and Ralph's truth that made the difference. Ralph admitted he wasn't monogamous, while Bob had sworn that he was.

On weeknights, Sarah tossed in bed, alone, pondering existential questions. She couldn't own Ralph. Yet, with Bob she'd behaved as if she could own another and so had he. No one can possess another human being. Sarah bared her body but not her soul.

Sarah remained unaware that once she grew dependent on a man's attention, she became obsessed. The progress she'd made toward independence when she'd moved to Palms was ebbing away and her inner turmoil showed on her face. Her features looked pinched, and black half-circles ringed her eyes. She wondered why nothing ever satisfied her. She was as miserable with a man in her life as she'd been without one.

Sarah acknowledged that one reason she put up with Ralph's conduct was that she didn't want to return to the fray and the "empty bed blues." A semi-steady lover in hand was worth two who were unavailable. Sarah was a woman who thought she needed a man in her life to feel whole, and that meant not confronting Ralph's undesirable behavior.

Ralph had been Sarah's lover off and on for a year and a half. She'd been faithful to him since his return; there was comfort in familiarity. Yet she felt soiled and tainted with shame and wondered why. At night, unable to sleep, she pondered her dissatisfaction. This was the life she thought she'd wanted; a modest job, but one that supported her artistic habit. A desirable young man in her bed; still she continued to brood over her past and worry about her future.

Saturday night Sarah placed Ralph's dinner on one of the walnut nesting tables that Bob had shipped after the divorce. Ralph barely noticed as he sat in front of the TV., his eyes fixed on the football game. Over his shoulder he threw a line, "Wow, Baby, did you see that forward pass!"

Sarah, seated at the ice cream parlor table, ignored him and picked at her fried chicken. She'd hated Bob's obsessive interest in football, baseball, basketball, and hockey. Did men have to watch everything that moved? Sarah found all sports b-o-r-i-n-g. She watched Ralph stuff his mouth without ever looking at the chicken leg he held in his hand. At least he kept his mouth shut while he ate, unlike Bob, who smacked his lips with every bite. She wondered why she'd left one man only to slave for another. She liked the idea of being part of a couple, but not the reality of it.

Ralph fell asleep on the floor in front of the TV. Sarah turned it off, covered him with a blanket, and went to bed. She listened to the street sounds; a car motor revved and caught, a squeal of tires and then silence, a horn toot, the rhythm of the ghetto street counterpoint to the repetitious tick of the clock. Commotion and silence, just like her relationship with Ralph.

Rolling over for the umpteenth time, Sarah wondered if what she missed was the excitement of a new lover. Sleeping with Ralph was routine and no longer a special event. She knew every inch of his well-formed body. Still, when he made the effort, he was a fantastic lover. Their intimacy had gone beyond the bedroom, now they shared their secrets as well as their bodies; but tonight, Ralph slept on the living room floor and there were no secrets or sex. She toyed with the idea of waking up her sleeping giant and saying, "Get dressed and go home." She bitched about men using her; was she using Ralph? Sarah ouches at the thought then reluctantly admitted she did use Ralph to fill her emptiness—physically and emotionally.

Sarah was tired of the everyday banality; she wanted stimulation, sexual and otherwise. She smiled into the darkness remembering the pleasure of shaking hands with Helen Reddy. Big deal! Touching the hand of a star didn't make her famous. What would? Her art displayed at the Whitney, that's what. Then she'd be famous, too. Last week she'd watched a Bonwit's saleslady fawn over Shelley Winters. Sarah didn't want anyone fawning over her; but she did want the arrogance-of-status that provided red-carpet treatment. No more standing in line at the bank and post office. No more dragging clothes to the laundromat and the dry cleaner. No more scrubbing toilets and dirty floors. Fame, to Sarah, meant courteous attention from salesladies and hair stylists. No more rotten haircuts.

Sarah toyed with the concept of fame until she realized that what she really wanted was self-confidence and self-esteem, and those qualities were not for sale. Not at any price. Fame was frosting on the cake, not the entree.

In the morning, Ralph awoke before Sarah and lumbered into the bedroom, nudged her awake, and said, "I'm hungry. Are you ever getting up?"

Sarah moaned, but obediently slid out of bed. In the bathroom she brushed her teeth and combed her hair. Then, makeup-less and still in her nightgown, she sliced apples for fritters in the kitchen. Why am I doing this? she asked herself. Waiting on Ralph had become a chore, not a pleasure.

After breakfast Ralph and Sarah climbed in bed and read the *Times*, like a long-married couple. When Ralph finished reading the sports page, he pulled her to him and, with passionate kisses, wiped away her anxiety.

After dinner that evening, as Ralph prepared to leave, Sarah pleaded; “Spend Christmas week here with me. I can’t bear the thought of being alone during the holidays. Last year at this time we weren’t even speaking to each other. Please say yes. I promise I’ll make us a Christmas to remember.”

“Okay, Baby, that’s cool. I’ve never had a decent holiday.”

CHAPTER 35

With anticipation and child-like enthusiasm, Sarah prepared for Christmas. She ordered a turkey at the local Safeway, drenched fruitcake with apricot brandy and baked cookies shaped like Christmas trees and holiday wreaths while she listened to “Adeste Fidelis,” “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen,” “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” without feeling resentful. The radioed music wafted through the apartment as Sarah cleaned and polished until the fresh scent of Lemon-Wax had replaced the stale odor of tobacco.

In Woolworth’s, Sarah went on a shopping spree placing one box of ornaments, one package of tinsel, and a prepackaged assortment of trimmings in her shopping cart. Grinning, she added marbles, a set of jacks, and a box of pick-up sticks to the half filled cart. She wanted lots of packages under the tree for Ralph, and knew his artist’s heart would enjoy her silly gifts. Her “real” present was a watch she’d purchased for him at K-Mart. Not wanting to spend money on a cut pine or spruce, she chose a large split-leaf philodendron from the dime store’s modest selection. She hadn’t enjoyed Christmas shopping this much in years.

At home she hung the ornaments and tinsel on the green plant and decorated the apartment with plastic mistletoe and fresh pine boughs wrapped in wide, red ribbon. The apartment smelled like Christmas as she wrapped Ralph’s gifts in the Sunday comics and sealed the packages with Scotch tape. She folded a white sheet around the base of the “Christmas tree,” piled the wrapped gifts beneath it, and stood back, with a smile on her face, admiring her handiwork.

Two days before Christmas, Sarah picked up the turkey she’d ordered and filled her shopping cart with the luxuries of egg nog, half and half, and a carton of whipping cream. The cart overflowed with Idaho potatoes, yams, brussels sprouts, apples, pears, banana’s, grapes, and mixed nuts. She crossed nutcracker off her shopping list and

continued down the aisle adding extras: candles, peppermint candy canes to hang by their hooked tops on the “tree,” small chocolates wrapped in silver-foiled Santa Claus costumes, hard Christmas candy, and a few other items she couldn’t resist—like rum for the egg nog. Then she called a halt to her impulse shopping and stood patiently in the checkout line, chatting with the woman who stood behind her.

It took several trips from the car to lug in the six tightly packed grocery bags. With only enough counter space in the kitchen for two bags, the remaining four were propped on the floor until Sarah finished emptying the contents into the refrigerator, cupboards, and cabinets. As she folded the last paper bag and tucked it between the fridge and wall, she heard the doorbell chime.

Certain it was Ralph, and early at that, she rushed to the door and greeted him with open arms. He dropped his school bag — filled with clean color-matched briefs and T-shirts, two new sport shirts, and textbooks — on the carpet next to his guitar and enfolded Sarah in his arms. They were both bubbling and filled with unbottled Christmas spirit.

Sarah spread fresh cream cheese on the bagels she’d purchased at the deli while Ralph stood over her laughing, “You’re turning me into a Jew! Now I even like your Matzo ball soup. What would my friends say?” he teased, as he dug out paper plates for the snack and she poured their tea. They sat at the table, both talking at once, neither listening.

“I had my last class this morning. I won’t have to deal with that uppity English teacher for a couple of weeks. She’s a looker, all right, younger than me, but she smells like someone who majored in English — all starch and tweed. Bet her degree is too new to be framed. She sets me up to make some minor error in pronunciation and then the whole class laughs their heads off. That skirt should spend one day in the ghetto. I’d teach her a thing or two.”

“Thank God I’ve finished my Christmas shopping. Now I can relax and enjoy the holidays. I stopped at the library and picked up a couple of new novels. I haven’t read a novel in ages. I can read my eyes out while you study for your finals.”

“This bagel makes a good snack. Fix me another? I’m so sick of working in the school cafeteria. I get sick to my stomach from the smells — dishing out scoops of mashed potatoes and lumpy gravy — I can’t eat. Hot damn, I won’t have to stand in line for anything for the next couple of weeks, and I sure like your cookin’.”

Sarah placed another bagel and cream cheese and more potato chips on Ralph’s plate. When he finished eating, she carried the paper plates and mugs into the kitchen, stuffed the plates in the garbage, and put the mugs in the sink. She returned to the living room carrying a lumped paper bag. “Here,” she said, handing it to him, “I’ve emptied that big glass container of pennies I’ve been saving for a year. You’ll have enough money to buy me a tablet or ball point pen. I want something under the tree, too.”

Sarah had orchestrated this event and planned every detail, including a gift for herself. She knew Ralph had scraped up enough money to buy a used ‘66 Chevy, on time, and with that purchase and his losses in Las Vegas, she doubted that he’d buy her a gift.

Ralph sat cross-legged on the carpet and counted pennies, while Sarah hung his shirts in her closet and made space in her top drawer for his rayon, dyed to match underwear. She placed his textbooks on her desk, propped his guitar up against the side, and stuffed his school bag in the front closet. Ralph continued wrapping pennies in white typing paper and sealing the ends with scotch tape, while Sarah manicured her fingernails and brushed on clear polish, deciding what she’d wear on Christmas Eve.

Ralph left the apartment with the bag filled with rolled pennies, and Sarah washed and blow-dried her hair. By the time he returned in late afternoon, she was dressed in a new long, full-length jean skirt, with a faded lady-of-the-manor silk blouse; the two top buttons open at the neck. She’d practiced unbuttoning three, like Shirl did, but felt too

uncomfortable. Unlike Shirl, Sarah had no cleavage, but her braless nipples pressed against the raw silk provocatively.

After a light dinner of homemade barley-mushroom soup and the deviled eggs Ralph adored, they settled in front of the TV and watched the news. While the sports commentator updated the Pasadena New Year's Day Rose Bowl parade, Sarah heated egg nog in a sauce pan, added a dash of rum, poured the traditional Christmas drink into two mugs, and sprinkled nutmeg on top. She handed Ralph his and he turned off the TV.

"This is really good," he announced after his first sip. "I've never tasted anything like it before. What the hell is it?"

"I've introduced you to egg nog, deviled eggs, and omelets. Don't you know the old joke about a man needing lots of eggs to keep up his virility?"

"I don't have any problem in that department," Ralph grinned. "Pour me another mug full and I'll play the guitar for you."

Ralph grabbed his guitar, strummed a few cords, and then, in a mellow Johnny Mathis voice, sang his rendition of Peter, Paul, and Mary tunes. Sarah sat on the carpet, her back propped against the wall and applauded, begging for more. "I love listening to you play and sing. Don't stop."

"No, that's enough for now. What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock."

"Okay, let's open our presents."

"What?"

"You heard me. I said, let's open the gifts. Now. I can't wait to see if you'll like your presents."

"Presents!" Sarah's eyes lit up and then her lips, pursed like a school marm, replied "No, no we can't do that. Christmas Eve is tomorrow night, not tonight. You'll just have to wait twenty-four hours and then we'll open presents."

"Who made the rules? Who says we have to wait? It's Christmas Eve someplace in the world right now!" Ralph laughed. "Come on. Let's open them now. No one will

be the wiser. I sure won't tell. Come on. We'll pretend tonight is Christmas Eve and get going opening the presents."

Sarah's reluctance melted with Ralph's rationalizing and in the spirit of breaking tradition, she jumped to her feet and, with élan, turned on the radio. "We need some Christmas carols for background, to set the mood."

Ralph turned off Bing Crosby's "White Christmas," chuckling, "That song only fits one of us!"

Snickering, Sarah fitted a cassette into her tape deck, pushed the "Play" button, and Nat King Cole's rendition of "Walking in a Winter Wonderland" filled the room with familiar melody. "This one's for both of us!" she laughed. "Nat's black, for you, and snow's white, for me!"

The Black knight and Snow White acted like conspirators as Ralph lit fat red candles and Sarah turned off the overhead light. Candlelight shadowed the room as Ralph carried "the tree" to the center of the living room. He rewrapped the sheet around the base and Sarah replaced the presents beneath it. Then they plunked down across from each other on the carpet, the gifts between them. Their smiles brighter than candle flame; their eyes twinkling like the lights displayed on a real Christmas tree.

They quibbled playfully over who would open presents first, until Ralph insisted and handed Sarah a present, store-wrapped in traditional paper. She tore at the scotch tape closure and a blue, hooded and zippered sweatshirt fell out. She slipped her arms through the sleeves and pulled the hood over her head, oohing and ahing over her gift. This gift, the first she'd received from a man since she'd left Bob, was more precious to her than the mink Bob had once given her for Christmas.

"I didn't give you that many pennies!" she laughed, as she knelt and stretched across the presents to kiss Ralph's cheek. He didn't pull away, but leaned toward her in anticipation of a second thank you kiss. There was no mechanic, or anyone else to witness Sarah's show of affection or inhibit Ralph's.

Ralph handed her two small packages and she opened them both, as excited as someone who still believed in Santa Claus. “A ball-point pen and a tablet. Wow!”

Before she had time to stretch across the unopened gifts to kiss Ralph’s cheek again, he jumped up saying, “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” He dashed out the front door, leaving it ajar, and moments later returned, grinning like an open pea pod. “Surprise,” he said. “I hid this in the car.” He handed Sarah a large, unwrapped, oblong cardboard box.

“What’s this?”

“Open it and see,” he said, as he stood over her, expectation written all over his face.

Sarah lifted the lid and gasped. Lying flat at the bottom of the shallow box was one of Ralph’s paintings — her favorite, the oversized cracker. She leaped to her feet, threw her arms around the artist’s waist and tears of happiness sparkled at the corners of her eyes. Ralph licked away her tears and kissed her full on the lips before they reseated themselves on the carpet.

“This is a wonderful Christmas, you’re wonderful! Andy Warhol paints soup cans and you paint crackers,” Sarah said, as she handed Ralph his “best present.” “I hope you’ll enjoy this as much as I enjoy your painting.”

Ralph ripped Snoopy’s face in his haste to unwrap his present. The wrapping off, he opened a fake leather case, removed a digital watch, and his eyes danced in delight. He buckled his Christmas present on his wrist and played with the fake leather strap like a toy. He looked as if he wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

“No one ever gave me a real Christmas present before,” he said, as he pushed the LCD button and counted the seconds. “This is great! Now when I run around the track after school, I’ll be able to count seconds and see if I’m beating my own record.” He sighed with pleasure and said, “Really, Baby, thanks.” This time it was he who leaned across the gifts to kiss Sarah full on the lips.

“It’s only from K-Mart, Ralph. I’m sorry I didn’t have enough money to buy you a really good watch.”

“No need for excuses, Baby. This watch is mighty fine. I’ve never had a Christmas like this in my whole life.” Ralph’s eyes looked misty as Sarah handed him one gift after another. He chuckled over the marbles and jacks, and promised he’d play pick-up sticks with her on Christmas Day. “When I was a kid,” he said, “my grandmother was too busy working for the white folks at the ‘big house’ and too old and too tired to do much Christmas fixing when she got home. The white folks always gave her a bag of leftovers, turkey and all, so we had plenty to eat, but no presents.”

“Where was your mother? Didn’t she give you anything?”

“No, she spent all her money on fancy clothes, and she would be off foolin with some man or other, and so would my older sister. Granny and me’d be home alone.”

The sadness in Ralph’s eyes touched Sarah deeply and reminded her of her own childhood. “How awful for you,” she consoled. “I know about miserable Christmas’s, too. My father always brought home the tree no one else would buy — sagging limbs, the tree listing to one side — he’d throw tinsel at the tree and at me, while my mother shouted, “No, Bart, that’s not the way to decorate. Hang one piece of tinsel at a time.

“The worst Christmas of my life was right after my fifth birthday. I tip-toed into my parent’s bedroom and my father was on top of my mother and the bed was bouncing, the springs squeaking — God, how I hated that sound. No, don’t laugh, Ralph. At five, that was traumatic. I picked up a rolled newspaper from the floor and tried to hand it to my father. He shouted, ‘Get the hell out of here!’ and my mother whispered, ‘Go into the living room and open one present.’ The bed never stopped moving.

“All alone I sat next to that unlit, pitiful tree and picked up a square metal box. I turned it round and round, looking at the colorful pictures. I must have pushed a lever, because a jack-in-the-box popped out and it’s ugly face scared the hell out of me. I let out a blood-curdling scream and my father shouted from the bedroom, ‘*Shut your damn*

mouth!' then he came rushing out of the bedroom, tripped on my dog, and kicked Snoogie half way across the room. He pushed another present at me and went to bed.

"It was awful. I remember wrapping my arms around Snoogie's neck and whispering, 'You're my only friend.' Then I stood at the window and traced my finger across the Jack Frost designs and let out another yelp of terror when a huge icicle melted from the sill and crashed to the ground. My father shouted more curses from the bedroom. The whole day was a miserable disaster.

"Until this minute, I never realized why I made such a fuss over Christmas when I was married. I wanted my kids to remember their wonderful childhood. The irony is, both my kids hate Christmas."

Sarah walked behind Ralph and wrapped her arms around him. She bent and kissed his cheek and said, "I'm so happy you're here with me. The Christmas's alone have been hell."

Ralph reached up and pulled Sarah around to his lap saying, "Enough of these old memories. Put on a fast record and let's dance." He gave her a lift to her feet, patted her affectionately on her rear, and she piled six records on the turntable. Listening to "Cheek to Cheek," Ralph held out his arms and, bent almost in half, danced cheek to cheek with Sarah. They danced in the living room, and then Ralph danced her into the bedroom, laughing as he said, "And now, Baby, you gets your bestus present—me!"

Still laughing, he gently pushed Sarah backwards on the bed, his body on top of hers, while they giggled and undressed each other. Tonight, Ralph didn't roll over into instant sleep after their lovemaking. Tonight, he held Sarah in his arms and whispered "sweet nothings." Then, giggling and teasing like two children, they played a game Ralph had invented the week before.

"Okay, Sarah," he said, "it's your turn. You're Mohammed Ali."

"I's Mohammed Ali. I's the bestus, cause I's me. Ralph a handsome stud, but not halves as handsome as me!"

“That’s not bad, Sarah. Do you really think Mohammed Ali is handsomer than me?”

“No way. You resemble him, but you’re much better looking. Your features are more refined. Okay, enough talking about you. Now you’re Mohammad Ali.”

“I’s Mohammad Ali cause I wears a fancy shirt, and whens I’s fighting, I’s never flirt.”

“That’s terrible,” Sarah laughed.

“No, Baby, that’s not terrible. Let me tell you about niggers.”

“Ralph! I don’t understand why you use that word. I was taught that it’s an insult, yet you and your friends say it all the time. Why?”

“You really are such a baby. You’re older than me, but I know more about life than you do. When a black boy goes to school and says to his friend, ‘Hey, nigger, your mother fucks,’ he’s in training, so that when a white man says, ‘You mother-fuckin nigger,’ he won’t even feel the pain. Black men, like punch drunk fighters, stop feeling by punching at each other.

“You’re always bitching about being poor, Sarah, but you don’t have the foggiest notion what poor is. I’ve seen poor. I am poor. If I didn’t have the values Granny beat into me, I’d be pimping and pushing drugs, too, ‘cause I’m sick of poverty. Art, not drugs, will be my ticket out of the ghetto. Drugs! Hell, white folk scream about drug abuse now that drugs have moved into their fancy white neighborhoods. Drugs were always in the ghetto and no one gave a damn.”

“How awful.”

“You are such a caring person, Miss Goodie-two-shoes, middle-class lady.”

Ralph’s sarcasm hurt. Sarah gave him a pained look and pulled away. He pulled her back into his arms and said, “C’mere Baby, stop pouting.” They made love again before they fell asleep.

On Christmas Eve Ralph played the guitar and sang, and when he finished, Sarah sang an off-key version of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Then she taught him how to

play Scrabble and he learned new words, like “levity” and “litigate,” and she learned that he could spell better than she could.

On Christmas day Sarah stuffed the turkey with a mixture of sautéed onions and celery, dried bread and eggs. She smeared butter over the skin and sprinkled garlic and paprika on top. While the turkey baked, they played pick-up-sticks and marbles. An hour before dinner, Ralph prepared the yams with brown sugar and marshmallows and they set the table together.

Both lingered over the fine meal they’d prepared. When Ralph dished up the homemade pumpkin pie, piled high with gobs of freshly whipped cream, he served it to Sarah who looked shocked. “You’re surprised I’m helping, huh?” he chuckled. “I’s helpin ‘cause it’s Christmas. Now don’t go uppity and spoiled, expecting help like this all the time,” he said, as he sat back down across from her and forked in his pie with gusto.

Before Sarah took a bite of dessert, she rose from her chair, walked to Ralph’s side and smacked kisses all over his face saying, “I really do appreciate all your help, Honey.” Then she sliced another piece of pie, added it to Ralph’s plate, and heaped spoonfuls of whipped cream on top. He stopped eating long enough to look into Sarah’s eyes with warmth and approval, and she glowed from his attention. Sarah knew from Ralph’s expression whether he was happy or sad, grieved or annoyed. As a child she’d learned that skill to protect herself from other people’s moods. Santee, her black nurse, had given her that same look of admiration and regard. The black people Sarah had known had given her more approbation than either one of her parents.

Black is beautiful, she thought, as she carried the dessert plates into the kitchen. Ralph washed the dishes, for the first time since she’d met him, and she dried. Tonight he turned off the TV earlier than usual, and held her hand while he led her into the bedroom. He undressed her with gentleness and talked to her before, as well as after, their lovemaking. Their intimacy had grown, like Ralph’s waist, from all the rich food. He told her he’d have to run around the track a few extra laps to slim down after all her

good cooking. And she told him about the march she'd organized for Martin Luther King.

Ralph told Sarah what it was like for him growing up in the fifties, and she told him stories about her childhood in the thirties. He asked questions like, "Do you know why black men are so much in demand in Beverly Hills?"

"Are they?"

"You bet! They screw the tails off those rich-bitches while their husbands are sweating off their balls in the office, or humping their secretaries. Those women are hungry. I mean, hungry for the attention and sex they never receive from their husbands."

Sarah held her fingers to her nose, not from Ralph's revelations, but from the explosive fart he'd managed while he talked. "Pee-you," she said, laughing.

"Oh, you like my farts, do you?" Ralph laughed as he pulled the sheet over her head so she could not escape the odor. She kicked and struggled to escape and they wrestled with laughter until he farted again and freed her. "It's your damn rich cooking, whatya expect?"

"When a Chinaman belches after one of his wife's fine meals, it's considered a compliment. I guess I could consider your farts the same way. Now, let's get serious. You were telling me about black men and Beverly Hills matrons."

"Never mind that, I'll tell you more about niggers. There are three kinds. The heavy-duty nigger who won the yearly TV award — like that black bastard who lives across the garden from you. He and his wife are really uppity, they barely nod to me. Then there's the super nigger with the Alabama survival kit — gas for his car and a shuffle. And now the new spiritual nigger who smokes pot, writes plays, and says, 'Brother's, it's plenty all right to fuck your sisters, but now you had best give them something in return.'"

"What kind of nigger are you, Ralph?" Sarah laughed, but the word nigger burnt her tongue.

“Never mind being a smart-ass. Don’t interrupt me. I’ve got more. Blacks are ridiculed for their taste in clothes — stacked heels and loud colors — yet when the fashion experts sell *our* style, they call it *high* style. Just listen to the way hip whites talk now, ‘Hey baby, what’s happening?’ ‘Foxy lady.’ ‘You turkey.’ That language originated in the ghetto and now I’m supposed to learn white English so I can get a job when it’s the black language that adds richness to the stilted way Yankees talk.

“I sterilize my language so I’ll be accepted in the white community and white men shit on me and hate me before I even open my mouth. Those blue-eyed business men with the graying temples who wouldn’t miss a Rotary meeting, stare right through me like I don’t exist.”

Sensitive to Ralph’s pain and the truth of his words, Sarah knew, without being told, that receiving his college degree would not substantially change the way the majority treated him. She couldn’t bear hearing any more of Ralph’s revelations so she changed the subject, but not completely.

“Did you try to ‘get-over’ with me, like those black studs in Beverly Hills?”

“Hey, what? Where’d you learn that phrase? I didn’t teach it to you.”

“Never mind where, just tell me.”

“At first, yes, I admit it. Then behind my own back and best interests, I fell for you. Besides, getting-over with you would be like taking candy from a baby, and even I’m not that rotten!” Ralph laughed. “No point in getting-over with you, Baby, you don’t have enough money! Too bad you don’t, like then we could really have fun spending it!” Ralph squeezed Sarah to him and said reassuringly, “I don’t have to be with you. I want to be with you. Now, say goodnight, like a good girl, and let’s get some sleep for a change.” Ralph kissed Sarah and said, “Goodnight, Baby.” She loved to hear the word ‘baby’ roll from Ralph’s lips, the word reminded her of Bart.

The day after Christmas Sarah helped Ralph with his homework. He had a design problem to complete and a paper due when his classes resumed after the holidays. Later they drove to a frame shop in Culver City. The oversized painting Ralph had given Sarah

was a perfectly rendered white soda cracker on an all-blue background. They chose a silver frame, and Ralph offered to pay for half. On the drive back to Sarah's apartment, she continued to rave about the painting. "With that frame, it will look spectacular. Keep on painting like that and one day we'll have a two-person show."

"Bullshit! Two-person show my ass. I'll have my own one-person show!"

By evening, after several days and nights of togetherness, Ralph was experiencing cabin fever. He suggested they see *King Kong* playing at a theater in Westwood Village. "Only problem," he said "is I spent my last cent helping out with the price of the frame."

"Never mind that. Don't feel bad. I'll treat. Just consider the ticket another Christmas present." Ralph drove Sarah's car, a later model junker than his, with her money in his pocket so he could buy the tickets. During the movie, he poked her in the ribs a couple of times, laughing, but refused to hold her hand. When they left the theater, she asked him why. "My father always held my hand while we sat through a Frankenstein movie. Why won't you?"

"Holding hands is for kids. Grow up."

At home in bed, Sarah pleaded, "Please don't leave tomorrow. Wait till after New Year's Eve. Please." Ralph responded by cradling Sarah in his arms. His massive shoulders jacketed her body and his soft skin polished hers as he penetrated Sarah's welcoming folds. Needless to say, he agreed to stay.

For ten days Sarah thought she reeked of sex. She thought the aroma of sex clung to her skin in a way no perfume ever had. She thought the odor had permeated her skin and clothing and that if she wore her jeans more than one day, any passing stranger would know what she knew.

On New Year's Eve she watched her lover urinate, his eyes on the ceiling as he sent his strawberry tipped penis in its little dance. He wiggled his penis until the last drop of urine was expelled. Sarah pointed to the strawberry tip, laughing as she said, "So that's where your Indian blood settled, huh, Ralph?"

“Yeah, Baby. Indian blood. Black blood. White blood. American blacks have as many colors as your pallet. Hey, run a tub for me, willya? We can talk while I soak.”

Sarah poured bubble bath under hot running water, then sat on the toilet seat and watched Ralph lean back into the bubbles. “Hey,” he said, “this is a new experience. If I’d know about bubbles, I wouldn’t have been a shower man.”

That night in bed, Ralph continued Sarah’s education. “When I was growing up,” he said, “maybe fourth grade through ninth, the boys said, ‘Hey nigger, I was with your mama last night.’ We always called each other nigger this and that. Black masochism; we harmed ourselves and we hurt each other. That hurt was passed on through generations of suffering. Soul is experiencing and understanding pain, and Baby, you’ve got soul.

“Remember when we met and I asked you if you were into black men? You didn’t know that some white women choose black men to ease their collective guilt. That type of woman falls for the myth that black men are better in bed, have bigger pricks, and they want to test for themselves. You were never like that. Course now you know that black men are definitely superior in bed,” Ralph said with a chuckle. Then, serious once more, he continued. “White slave masters programmed blacks to be studs. After we fathered their future slaves, they sold us away. Black men and women had no rights; they couldn’t even marry. To make a commitment they ‘jumped over the broom.’ In the slave mind, that joined them, but the white owner never considered his slaves married. He screwed every good-looking black woman on his plantation. How’d you think so many of us got to be light-skinned?

“Yeah, we’re studs. We never had a choice. Male slaves were sold away to another plantation and ‘jumped over the broom’ with someone else’s wife. Now the white folks bitch and say blacks have no morals. The plantation owners screwed our wives and took away our dignity as men; who is it that has no morals? White America is reaping what those bastard plantation owners sowed. Now rich, Beverly Hills matrons want a black lover to sip sherry from their cunts with a straw.

“Don’t cry, Baby. You’re not like those white women I’ve described. You see me as a real person. You’ve definitely got soul. Most of the time I forget you’re not black, too.”

On New Year’s Day, Ralph packed the fresh underwear and shirts Sarah had laundered for him, and headed for the door with an armload of books to dump in his rattle-trap car. When he returned to pick up his guitar, Sarah clung to him and asked, “When will you be back?”

“I don’t know. My finals are coming up. I won’t be coming over so often. In fact, I think we should stop seeing so much of each other. Start seeing more of your other men and don’t depend on me so much. Remember, we’re not a couple.”

Sarah understood. Clearly the emotional closeness was too much for Ralph. He needed distance.

At the door, he kissed Sarah good-bye, his tongue deep into her mouth, then he hoisted his school bag over his shoulder and walked out the door without looking back.

Ralph was gone. The odor of his sweet skin clung to the sheets and the wetness of his come clung to Sarah’s thighs. She knew he’d be back.

CHAPTER 36

Dashing from the kitchen, Sarah grabbed the phone on the first ring, praying it was Ralph. “So, how was your live-in week?” she heard Glo bubble into the phone.

“Terrific. When did you get back from Hawaii? How was it?”

“Yesterday. The trip was great, but I swear to God, the beach-bums gave Blythe the eye more often than me. At thirteen, her boobs are bigger than mine.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Of course, I am! I learned that trick from you. Okay, I got my share of ogles, but I couldn’t do anything about it, not with Blythe around. Sarah, you’ve got it made; your sons aren’t around to witness your behavior.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m lucky the twins called me on Christmas Day.”

“You and your Christmas. Jews don’t celebrate Christmas. We *never* had a tree in our house.”

“No matter how pitiful we had a tree, with a few non-presents under it. Like the thick wool sweater that itched; not five cashmeres like you received for Chanukah. My Gentile friends — all my friends were Gentile until I met you — had a dozen gifts under their trees.”

“Poor you. What a deprived childhood,” Gloria said, sarcasm ringing her words.

Taking Glo’s remark literally, Sarah replied, “I never thought about it that way, maybe I did.”

“You sound terrible. Did something happen with Ralph?”

“Yes and no. Yes, our time together was terrific. We were never closer. He stayed with me for ten days, not a week as planned. But when he left, he reminded me that we’re not a couple. He said he wouldn’t be coming over as often and he hasn’t called me since. I don’t understand; we were so close—I mean emotionally, not just sexually.”

Glo's tongue, at the roof of her mouth, clucked several times before she said, "Sarah, you need help; Ralph needs space. You probably smothered him with attention and he felt suffocated. I've told you before, but I'll tell you again; make an appointment with my therapist."

Sarah felt kicked in the stomach and said in a half-whisper, "I suppose you're right, but I don't have the money for therapy."

"Stop wasting money on Ralph, and you'll have enough to get the help you need."

After thirty minutes of puling for consolation and receiving none, Sarah hung up feeling more isolated than ever. Bored and lonely, she removed a half empty box of graham crackers from a kitchen shelf and carried the "nourishment" with her to bed. On top of the blanket, propped up against pillows, she nibbled on graham crackers and brooded. She considered the possibility that somehow she'd offended Ralph, and had to restrain herself from calling him to ask if she had. She toyed with that notion for a while before her mood shifted and she cursed him for not calling to thank her for her hospitality.

Her mood swinging from one extreme to the other, Sarah finished off the crackers and hurled the empty box across the room. It landed inside the oversized waste basket. At least her aim was good for something. She raised her hips, struggled with the blanket beneath her, and managed to slip under it. She turned off the bedside lamp, wrapped her arms around her shoulders, and snuggled into sleep.

At 6:00 A.M., Sarah awoke to sunlight streaming across the bedroom and cursed herself for neglecting to pull down the window shade before she went to bed. Reaching for her habitual first cigarette of the day, she lit it and watched smoke curl in and out of the sunstreaks parading across her bed. Without sunlight the dust particles, undoubtedly germ laden, were invisible.

That concept triggered a series of perceptions. Sarah always looked for hidden meaning in what others might consider insignificant phenomena. The pattern of dust and germs represented prejudice and bigotry. The impact of those words remained invisible without the enlightenment of experience.

Sarah had experienced prejudice and bigotry when she organized the sympathy march for Martin Luther King. She'd become the target for the animosity usually reserved for blacks.

Sarah wondered if that “march” had served any practical purpose. She wondered when her compassion for blacks had begun. Was it the vacation in New Orleans with Bob? They’d viewed former slave quarters and the wooden platform whereupon slaves were bought and sold like horse flesh. Was it the slave ship they’d visited with its tiers of pallets below deck, where slaves were chained, dead or alive, until the ship arrived in America? Was she compassionate because she was a Jew—another victimized minority? Whatever the reason, Sarah identified with black people and their suffering.

Unable to find a satisfying answer to her quest for deeper understanding, Sarah puffed away, pondering her idealistic belief that America was the land of the free. Like hell it was “All men are created equal, with liberty and justice for all.” Yeah, sure, if you were white and male. The hell with liberty and justice for the rest. Blacks were slaves a century ago; women still were. Was Sarah repeating the same slavish attitude with Ralph that she had with Bob? Was love a bondage and marriage another legalized form of slavery?

All these thoughts about slavery triggered a remembrance and Sarah smiled, understanding at last her real motivation for the King march. She closed her eyes, and vividly recalling when her compassion for black people had started, she reached for her journal.

* * *

Bart shot through the door like a “bat out of hell,” one of his favorite expressions. Bart, home at 2:00 P.M., an uncommonly early hour for him.

“El,” he bellowed, “where are you?”

Elizabeth rushed from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her flowered apron. Nine-year-old Sarah ran from the bedroom, out of bed for the last day of her winter cold. “Go ahead, both of you look out the window. I have a surprise.”

Neither Elizabeth nor Sarah were surprised to see the shiny new black Cadillac. Bart “surprised” them every year, and every year they played the same game. Bart yelled “surprise” and Elizabeth and Sarah rushed to the living room window and peeked through the venetian blinds to see his new Caddy. “I’d rather have a Ford,” Elizabeth said.

“Never, not on your life. I’ll never buy a Ford for myself, or for you. Ford hates Jews,” Bart said, rocking back and forth on his heels with impatience.

“Bart, what is it? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“El, Honey, tomorrow we’re going to Florida.”

“Bart, we can’t.”

“What do you mean, can’t? I’ve got everything arranged. Gus will work a double shift behind the bar, and Madeline will keep an eye on the girls.” Bart plunked down in an overstuffed chair in the living room and eagerly awaited an answer.

“We can’t, Bart. All my clothes are at the cleaners.”

“I’ll buy you new clothes when we get to Florida.”

“Sarah’s in school.”

“No, she’s not,” Bart said, pulling Sarah onto his lap and biting her cheek. “She’s right here,” he laughed. “Get her excused from school. You have before.”

Elizabeth gave Bart nine reasons not to, and Bart gave her ten reasons of his own. When Bart sat twiddling his thumbs, El knew she’d lost. She grabbed her coat and, halfway out the door, yelled back, “Bart, stay with Sarah until I get back. I’ve got to catch Miss Penrose before school lets out.”

In less than twenty-four hours, the Mindels were on their way. Sarah perched on the wide back seat of the new Caddy. Her new pad of white paper on her lap. Her new, sharply pointed pencil poised over it ready for action. (“Mrs. Mindel, Sarah may be excused for two weeks. However, she must write about the trip and read the report aloud to the class when she returns.”)

Sarah had been assigned the same task the year before and would have the same assignment the following year. Last year she’d written her report about Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Now, as the Caddy zoomed past the “YOU ARE NOW ENTERING GEORGIA” sign, Sarah called to Bart at the wheel, “Daddy, what should I write about?”

“Don’t worry, Baby. You’ll think of something. I’ve gotta keep my mind on the road. These damn trucks keep trying to pass me.”

Sarah gripped her pencil tight in her fingers, ready to write about the next view that appealed to her. In Arkansas she'd written about the chenille bedspreads, embroidered with multi-colored peacocks, aflame in yellow, blue, green, and orange. The peacocks were duplicated in every service station across the state and the bedspreads fluttered from clotheslines in front of every other house.

In Alabama she'd asked questions when her father had stopped for gas. The service attendant had wiped the windshield and in a deep southern accent she'd learned to recognize, said, "Yesum, Missy, Alabama's 'the heart of Dixie' known as the 'cotton state and the lizard state.'" Sarah wrinkled her nose when she heard lizard. She hated creatures that wiggled and moved. The only thing he'd said that she added to her report was, "the state bird is the Yellowhammer." She didn't have the foggiest notion what a Yellowhammer looked like, but she liked the sound of the word.

Facts rarely appealed to Sarah. She wrote about the narrow back-country roads, the shacks with broken windows and peeling paint, and the rusty gardens of dead autos that littered every yard.

She described the naked, dirt-streaked children with runny noses who darted into the road. She didn't record Bart's swear words when he slowed down to avoid hitting them. She knew better than that.

Uninspired, Sarah laid her tablet and pencil on the seat beside her and held her palm out the open car window. The warm air cupped in her hand felt like warm cotton as she watched men working on the roadside, and wondered why they had heavy chains around their ankles. She decided not to write anything about that; she didn't want to risk asking her father another question, not while he concentrated on driving.

That night the Mindel family stayed in an ante-bellum mansion in Atlanta. The house was massive and had a bathroom larger than Sarah's bedroom at home. The mansion with its winding staircase reminded Sarah of *Gone with the Wind*, the movie she'd already seen twice. The following morning at breakfast, six black men in white uniforms stood in a waiting station

around the Mindel's table. "More hominy grits, Missy?" the smiling waiter asked, his teeth gleaming white against his dark face."

"No thank you, sir," Sarah replied, as she pushed her scrambled eggs on toast around her China plate and left her hominy grits untouched.

Back in the Caddy for another day of driving, Sarah clutched her pencil, prepared to write about her adventure in a real *Gone with the Wind* mansion when road signs caught her attention:

The man

Who never

Washes

Counts his

Girls as

Losses

Burma Shave

Sarah laughed at the funny advertisement while an army of insects splattered on the windshield and she ignored the lined paper tablet on her lap.

Ten minutes later, Bart eased the Caddy into a service station and announced to the attendant, "Fill her up. Do a good job on the windshield, too. Those damn bugs are blurring my vision!"

Sarah climbed out of the back seat and joined her mother. Both prepared to "empty" themselves. Elizabeth located the washroom key on a hook inside the office and handed it to Sarah. After she peed, Sarah washed her hands and rushed back to the office, clutching the nickel Bart had given her when they'd pulled in. Her fingers tingled from frost as she dug past the Coke bottles in the cooler. In triumph she found a 7-Up and yanked off the cap with the metal opener nailed to the wall. She raised the cold drink to her lips, and the bubbles tickled them. She belched and covered her mouth. "Excuse me," she said, even though there was no one to hear her. She looked up at the Herbert Tarreyton sign on the office wall and read, "Plain or cork tipped." The poster girl's breast bulged out of her low-cut dress and Sarah giggled without knowing why.

Outside she spied a hand-painted sign dangling from a string tacked to the side of the building. It read: "Talk to a former slave. Ten cents." She ran to the car and looked at her father, his head tilted back against the front seat, his eyes closed. She wondered if he was asleep and if she should risk waking him. Bart sensed her standing at the open window and opened his eyes. "What is it, Baby?" he asked.

"May I please have ten cents, Daddy?"

"What for?"

Sarah pointed to the sign and Bart reached in his trouser pocket and handed her a coin saying, "Okay, Baby, here's a dime, but don't take too long. We have lots of miles to cover. I wanna get to Florida by tonight."

"Thank you, Daddy," Sarah said politely, as she whirled on her heel and raced toward the black man who sat on a cane chair propped up on red soil. Sarah thought the red loam of Georgia looked more appealing than the brown dirt of Indiana and Illinois.

The old black man's postured back looked as rigid as the slats beneath him. The scorching Georgia sun beat down on his frayed shirt buttoned to the collar. The shirt was spotless, except for the armpits, which had wide wet stains. Sarah wondered why the sun had browned his face so much darker than hers.

Sarah's hair ribbon lay limp in her moist hair, her Peter Pan collar wilted in the heat. Her princess-style dress, nipped at the waist like Shirley Temple's, felt damp as she brushed an invisible spot from the cotton material and said, "Hello, sir." The old man looked past her shoulder at some distant horizon without acknowledging her presence.

Nervous, Sarah tugged at the hem of her too-short skirt and tried again, "How old are you, sir?"

A weathered face turned toward Sarah slowly and the man mumbled, "ninety-two." His voice was so low, Sarah could barely hear his answer. "Were you really a slave?" she asked, and leaned close to the man's lips to hear his reply.

"Yesum, Missy. Bouts your age, then."

"What was it like to be a slave?"

The old man looked directly into Sarah's eyes with a look of cold rage that sent shivers through her. She recognized the anger. She also recognized the pained expression on his face and turned from his gaze with embarrassment. She wondered what she had said to cause him to dislike her so much.

In that shift of focus, Sarah discovered a grove of trees several yards behind the former slave, and wondered why a bucket dangled from a rope nailed to the treebole. Her curiosity outweighed her discomfort and she turned back to the old man and asked, "Why is that bucket hanging from a tree? Please, sir, can you tell me?"

A smile tickled the corners of the man's parched mouth. His brown face looked to Sarah like a dried coconut that had been shaved smooth. His short white hair, curled in tight ringlets around his face, looked like the wool of a newborn lamb. "Why does you ask, girl?" His eyes warmed with his question.

"I have to write a report for school. Could you help and tell me about the bucket? Maybe I can write about that."

The old man's gentle smile turned into a broad grin. Sarah grinned back and spontaneously reached out to touch his hand resting on his lap. When he covered her hand with his, she felt warm and accepted.

The former slave's voice came alive as he stretched out his free hand and patted Sarah on top of the head. His voice was strong and resolute as he described in detail why a bucket hung from a tree. "That'us a maple tree, Missy. Sap oozus and drip froms that tree and maple syrups drips inta dat bucket. That'us the syrup for yourn pancakes, honey-chile. You is as sweet as syrup yourself." The old black man patted the young white girl's hair ribbon and said, "Ah hopes ya gets the bestus grade."

The separation of age, race, class, and gender melted with the old man's words; he and the young girl looked into each other's eyes with caring understanding. The warmth of his kind smile felt like a hug to Sarah and she looked deep into his eyes. To her they looked as soft and brown as a chocolate covered doughnut.

* * *

Still smiling, Sarah padded into the bathroom. She had written about that experience and when she'd read the paper aloud in front of her fourth-grade class, her knees were shaking, but the teacher gave her an A for her performance. The ninety-two-year-old former slave had touched Sarah's nine-year-old hand and brought the reality of slavery across the generations. What if Ralph was the great, great, great, great-grandson of that man; wouldn't that be ironic?

On Thursday, January 6th, Ralph called. He didn't mention Christmas or offer any explanation for not calling sooner.

"I'll be over Saturday morning," he announced, "instead of Friday night." So that's what he meant about cutting down on the time they spent together.

On Saturday Ralph arrived at noon, rather than ten as he'd promised. He threw his school bag on a chair and whined, "My back is killing me. I played basketball all morning. Willya give me a back rub?"

"You are two hours late, Ralph! I have better things to do than wait around here for you." He ignored her complaint and she gave in with a sigh and said, "Okay, take off your shirt." When she returned to the living room with the liniment, she found Ralph shirtless, lying on his stomach, full-length across the carpet. Sarah straddled his trousered ass and resentfully rubbed and kneaded the soft skin of his shoulders and back.

Sarah wished someone would give her a back rub. Her strong young lover had played basketball all morning while she had rushed to the grocery store at 9:00 so she'd be back in time for Ralph's arrival at 10:00. She'd lugged in the grocery bags, stacked the canned goods, straightened up in the apartment, wiped the bathroom sink and tub, and she was tired. Her fingers and palms ached, so she bent her arm and traced her elbow down the center of Ralph's spine and said, "That's it, kiddo." A knife would have been more appropriate than her elbow.

Ralph laid around fussing for attention most of the afternoon. After dinner he refused to clear the table. When Sarah complained, he told her she sounded like a drill sergeant shouting orders. "My sergeant in Vietnam was a pussy-cat compared to you! Besides, this is your home, not mine, so it's your job to clean up. I'm your guest."

Sarah scraped the dishes and piled them into the sink, vowing to leave them unwashed until hell froze over. If Ralph refused to wash them in the morning, she'd refuse to make his breakfast. She was fed up with being any man's slave.

Ralph knew her moods and, aware that he'd pushed her to the limit, he didn't ask her to run his tub. "I'm gonna run me a hot bath," he announced, "will you let me pour in some of your bubble bath?"

He climbed into the tub, sank down into the bubbles and invited Sarah to keep him company while he soaked. She sat on the closed toilet seat and listened to him as he continued the saga of his past. He looked her in the eye and watched for her reaction, "My grandma used to bring home food from the 'big house' in a brown paper bag. We got the white folks leavings after their parties and those leftovers were better than our usual fare.

"Old Mammy, that's what the white folks called her, could always find work. It's still easier for a black woman to land a job than it is for a black man. We're no longer called Mammy, or Boy, but nothing's really changed. Now we can eat where we want and 'black is beautiful' has been hoisted for TV commercials, but a black man's credentials still have to be twice as long as any white man's. Prejudice is still the name of the game. It's still whitey who makes money on the sweat and blood of the black man. White wrapped prejudice," he laughed, "that would make a great opening for a poem."

Sarah held her thumb and forefinger a half-inch apart and said, "I have this much knowledge of what prejudice feels like. After the King march, my neighbors refused to speak to me for months and months. The damn bigots. You're more of a man than that white jerk I married. Prejudice is someone not liking me because my eyes are green. How can you stand being put down for the color God gave you?"

"Anyway I can," Ralph said, as he opened the drain, climbed out of the tub, and dripped across the throw rug. He stood patiently and waited for Sarah to dry his back with a clean Turkish towel and continued his theme. "I'm trying to make a better life for me," he said. "I'm attending college and sticking with my studies no matter what. Some of my brothers just give up and turn to drink and drugs just to ease the pain."

Fully dried, Ralph bent over the empty tub, wiped it and rinsed it clean, making points with Sarah. Then he said, “Hey, Baby, bring me my school bag, I need clean underwear.”

Sarah trotted to the living room and back and watched Ralph step into his matching avocado green, nylon T-shirt and jockey shorts. She stood admiring his athletic physique as he said, “After we broke up, I’d be studying and some of the brothers would stop in with their open wine bottles in brown paper bags. They wouldn’t even bother to pour it into a glass. We’d be drinking, carrying on — my wine was always in a glass,” he chuckled. “We’d be laughing and talking and before I knew it, it would be 4:00 A.M., sometimes later. I fell behind on my homework, skipped morning classes so many times I thought I’d never catch up. Those brothers wanted me to fail. They wanted to pull me back down to their level. They resented me trying to work my way up and out of the ghetto by getting an education. One of those guys is a better artist than even me, but he just gave up and quit trying. The last time I saw him, he was sitting on the curb, nursing the bottle in his paper bag.

“So one day, I realized I was fucking up my life. I took a sober look and I stopped drinking and horsing around with the guys. After I stopped boozing, Jack gave me your phone number and address. I’m real glad he did. You’ve been a real good influence on me, Baby. My grades are way up since we’re back together. Probably have a couple of A’s after exams. I won’t be a loser like my father.

“My father dropped dead at fifty-two from a heart attack. All his boozing and womanizing finally caught up with him. That’s not going to happen to me. My father never accomplished a goddamn thing in his entire fuckin’ life. I’m an artist and the world’s going to recognize me, black man or not. No way am I gonna drop dead at fifty-two without making my mark.”

“Ralph, do you like liver?”

“Hell, no. Where’d that question come from? I was telling you about my father, the high liver, not the calf’s liver,” Ralph chuckled.

“Something you said reminded me of liver. My father detested it. One night at dinner . . .”

* * *

“God damn it, El,” Bart raged. “You know I despise liver!” he shouted as he shoved his dinner plate half way across the table.”

“I know, Bart,” El responded in a gentle voice, “but it’s good for you.”

“Don’t tell me what’s good for me. I hate liver. Fry me an egg and don’t serve me liver again. Ever.”

El left her favorite—liver and onions—cooling on her plate, removed Bart’s dinner plate, and trotted to the refrigerator for two eggs.

Sixteen-year-old Sarah sat quietly at the table and stared straight ahead. Fixated on the China dishes lined up on their edges on the ledge across from her, she memorized their pattern. Bart’s deep, angry voice always terrified her and she sat hunched over her dinner plate, her neck muscles taut, her shoulders drawn in.

“Sarah!” Bart said, his voice hard edged.

Sarah turned her face toward her father, but her body faced the China dishes as she said, “Yes?”

“What do you mean ‘yes?’ When I speak to you, you say, ‘yes sir.’”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s better.” Bart swallowed air and sighed, “God, the day I’ve had. Those damn girls have been at the booze again. I need a new system, they’ve caught on to the way I mark the bottles.”

Sarah stared at her father without responding, and he raised his voice and said, “Sarah, I’m talking to you. Pay attention.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sarah, you’re a mess. Look at yourself.” Bart said critically, and Sarah bent her head and looked at her wrinkled blouse. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but I’ve worn this blouse all day.”

“So? I’ve worn this shirt all day and there’s not a wrinkle in it. Have your mother put more starch in your clothes.”

“But starch scratches, Daddy.”

“Stop complaining. You don’t have a tie strangling you.”

“No one told you to wear a tie!”

Bart’s arm flashed across the table and he smacked Sarah with the back of his hand shouting, “Don’t be fresh with me, young lady.” She flinched and jumped up and out of her chair. She rubbed her arm, and could feel the smart of her father’s diamond pinkie ring as she stood looking down at the repulsive liver on her plate.

“Sit down and apologize to your mother!” Bart ordered.

Sarah looked down at her plate, raised her voice and shouted, “I hate liver, too!” Impulsively she hurled her balled linen napkin on the liver, glared at her father and muttered, “Drop dead.”

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?”

“I said, DROP DEAD!”

In a burst, Bart’s chair banged against the wall as he leaped to his feet and chased Sarah through the house. She reached the safety of her bedroom but before she could completely close the door she trapped Bart’s hand and arm inside the crack. “When I get my hands on you!” he shouted, as he pushed and she shoved the barrier between them. Terrified, Sarah pressed the weight of her body against the door and pleaded, “Please, Daddy. Please. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Honest. All the kids say it. It’s just an expression. Please, Daddy, please.”

The pressure on Bart’s side of the door subsided and Sarah responded in kind. Bart removed his arm from the crack and Sarah closed the door quietly and whimpered, “Honest, Daddy, I’m sorry. Honest.”

For the next three nights, Sarah sat at the dinner table, totally ignored as her father and mother spoke to each other and no one spoke to her. If Bart wanted the salt, he used the boarding house reach rather than ask Sarah to pass anything. She felt invisible. After dinner on the fourth night, Sarah asked her father for her allowance, already three days overdue, and Bart broke the silent treatment long enough to respond. “No,” he said, “you may not have your allowance. You are rotten and fresh. No allowance, and don’t ask me again. I’m not speaking to you.”

After dinner, on the fifth night of silence, Sarah squeezed onto Bart's lap, kissed his cheek and said, "C'mon, Daddy. You always tease me and then say you don't mean it. I'd had a bad day, too. I wasn't elected to Girl's Club, and I hate liver as much as you do. I'm sorry, Daddy. Honest. I'm truly sorry. I could never mean I want you to drop dead. I love you. 'Drop dead' is just high school talk. I promise never to say those words to anyone again." Sarah pressed her cheek to her father's and whispered, "Please forgive me, Daddy. I love you."

Bart's eyes were misty as he wrapped his arm around his daughter's waist and she snuggled into his chest. In a hurt voice he said, "You really insulted me, Sarah. I thought you meant it."

"I could never mean that, Daddy. I'm truly sorry. I love you."

"I love you too, Baby," Bart said as he cradled his rebellious teen-ager in his arms. Sarah received her allowance from Bart before he left for work.

* * *

In bed Sunday night, Sarah curled into Ralph's arm, her head on his chest as he said, "I love you, too, Baby. Now roll over and go to sleep. I'm tired."

"Wait, Ralph," she pleaded, "there's something I want to tell you. Remember I told you about the liver? Well, what I didn't tell you was that not too many years after I told my father to 'drop dead,' he did." Sarah held her breath for a split-second and then in a tearful voice said, "Ralph, my father was murdered when I was twenty-two."

"So?"

Sarah exploded, "So!" and up on one elbow she looked down at Ralph and repeated, "So! Didn't you hear me, Ralph? I said my father was murdered." She shivered and shock waves from the voiced word "murdered" made her tremble as she choked out, "Ralph, I just told you my deepest, darkest, most shameful secret, and all you can say is, 'so?'"

"Murder is no big deal, Sarah. I've seen men killed in the ghetto with their guts spilling out of their stomachs."

"Ralph, damn it, I'm not talking about some stranger in the ghetto. I'm talking about my father."

“Listen to me. If you want to cry about your sadness and the grief of losing your father when you were young, I’ll listen, but I don’t want to hear a word about the way he died. Men are murdered in the ghetto every day and you don’t read about it in the newspaper. So your father was murdered, so what!” Ralph said, as he rolled away from her and turned his face to the wall. He was asleep within minutes.

Sarah listened to Ralph’s soft breathing as he slept while she lay awake and stared into the darkness, unable to erase the memory of his words. After a restless night, she remained in bed while Ralph dressed. She watched him tug his trousers over his shoes and asked, “Why do you put your shoes on first?”

“I never know when I’ll have to make a run for it!” Ralph laughed. “I’ve got to run now, or I’ll be late for my nine o’clock class.”

Sarah watched Ralph tuck in his shirt and zip his fly and remembered all the mornings she’d laid in bed and watched Bob dress for work. Her life had been very different then.

“You’re awfully quiet this morning,” Ralph said, as he pulled on his jean jacket over his blue denim shirt. He walked to the bed, buzzed Sarah on the lips and said, “Bye, Baby. I’ll be talking to you.”

Sarah remained motionless and stared up at the ceiling as she heard the front door slam.

CHAPTER 37

Lying flat on her back, Sarah's eyes were fixed and unseeing on the bedroom ceiling. She hadn't moved since Ralph left. She had no idea whether it had been minutes or hours before; the fact that he'd left was the least of her concerns. The swelling in her throat from unshed tears, threatened to choke her as she rolled over on her side and curled into a fetal position. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she wrapped her hands around the back of her neck to gentle herself as she rolled from side to side.

Sarah, who had cried all her life if anyone gave her a cross look or an unkind word, was now unable to cry. She yearned for the relief of tears. She knew Ralph was right, it was not the way her father died, but the fact that he was dead. She kneaded the back of her neck to ease her tension and massaged her scalp with her fingertips, but nothing she did quelled her mounting anxiety.

Totally frustrated, she rose to her knees like a coiled spring and rocked back and forth, both hands balled up in tight fists. Back and forth she rocked until the tears finally came. Moans of despair whirled like the blades on a ceiling fan as twenty-six years of repressed emotion erupted and she keened and mourned her father. Her grief was boundless as tears of loss and release washed her face, cascaded over her chin, and down her neck.

Gasping for breath, Sarah paused for a moment and then pounded her head against the pillow as Elizabeth had once pounded hers against the bedroom wall. Her energy depleted, Sarah collapsed on her stomach. Still tormented, she rose up on her knees and teeter-tottered back and forth until the mattress beneath her shook with the violence of her sorrow.

Too physically exhausted to continue, she clutched the pillow to her breast and doubled over it, yelping like a wounded animal. Then, like a tire gone flat, she rolled over on her back, prostrate and tearless.

Lying perfectly still, Sarah listened to the laughter of children playing outside her open bedroom window. Their playful giggles increased her agony and her mouth stretched open wide in a silent scream; no sound escaped her lips. The irony of joyous laughter as a counterpoint to her personal anguish only increased her distress.

Sarah fingered her losses like Greek worry beads. The loss of Bob had oozed out over months and months of regret. This crushing heartbreak had been festering for over two decades like an unlanced boil. Now heartache had flared up from her subconscious and she was no longer able to suppress it.

The children's high-pitched shrieks faded as they ran from the yard, and silence, so profound it felt palpable, chilled the room. Sarah shivered and twisted her neck from side to side. She scrunched her eyes tightly closed like two fists to block out the sunlight. An unexpected vision of flashing red lights, twirling atop a police car, made her gasp aloud. The blood red lights whirled faster, faster, and traced bloody patterns of light against leaf and branch as Sarah relived the nightmare of her father's murder scene.

Words and phrases, long squelched for lack of an outlet, played in Sarah's ears as she remembered Aunt Esther's warning, "Don't cry, Sarah. You'll upset your mother. Don't cry, Sarah. You need to be strong for your mother. Her husband's dead. You're all she's got."

The phone rang, as shrill and demanding as it had the night Bart was killed. Sarah listened to the repetitious rings, the sound reviving her memory of that night, so long ago, when she'd bolted up in bed, tense and fearful, to awaken Bob and wait for him to quiet the phone. Now she lay still, her thumbs locked in her palms, unwilling to answer. There was no one in the world she wanted to talk to. No one who could share her misery.

The phone silenced after a dozen rings and Sarah wondered at the caller's persistence. What if that call was important? Important to who? Important to the caller, that's who, Sarah thought with bitterness. She was pleased that she hadn't answered the phone, sure now that the caller was her mother, calling to remind her to send a birthday card to Aunt Esther.

Sarah sucked at her lower lip and played, “If only.” If only Elizabeth hadn’t had a nervous breakdown when Bart died, they might have grieved together. If only her mother were emotionally available, they could heal their wounded hearts by mourning together.

Each and every September 15, Sarah dutifully called Elizabeth with the hope that this time her mother would acknowledge the pain and their mutual suffering. Last year, Elizabeth said, “I’ve been alone for twenty-six years. Now you know what it’s like to be alone with no one to help you make decisions.”

“Yes, Mom. I want to talk about Daddy’s death.”

Elizabeth cut her off, “I don’t want to talk about it. But as long as you brought it up, there is something I want to tell you. I would have taken care of everything when Daddy died. I’m stronger than you are.”

Sarah felt kicked in the stomach and changed the subject. Later, when she reported the conversation to Gloria, her friend responded, “What? Does she practice bi-location? Who’s she kidding?”

Sarah longed again for a sister, a brother, siblings who could share the grief of their father’s death and the burden of their mother’s denial. Then, with twisted humor, Sarah thanked God she didn’t have a sister. What if her sister was Elizabeth’s clone? Then she’d have to contend with two of them. Like a sculptor shaping marble, Sarah chipped away at her own denial without knowing where the dust of memory would settle.

An unfamiliar calm caressed her, and she folded her hands under the back of her head, her elbows jabbing the air as she reckoned with something she’d never before considered. Sarah questioned why she hadn’t hounded the police chief and demanded a real investigation of her father’s murder. Why had she accepted the judge’s version of “unknown assassins” without an argument.

She knew she’d had her hands full caring for the twins, visiting her mother twice a day in the hospital, and packing up her mother’s house, but now she refused to consider those justifications as valid. There had to be another explanation, Sarah thought, as she sat up and reached for her first cigarette of the day, surprised that it was already noon.

She puffed away, the answer eluding her, as she dumped the overflowing ashtray into the bedside wastebasket. She ground out her smoke and the answer she'd searched for came to her crystal clear. She knew with certainty that if she'd pursued an inquiry into her father's murder, and if his assailants had been captured, her mother would have had to testify in court. If Elizabeth had been sane enough to speak, without a doubt after her testimony, she would have had to return to the hospital and might have lost her mind forever.

If capturing the murderers would have brought Bart back to life, Sarah knew she would have pursued that inquiry no matter what the cost. But he was dead forever, so why risk her mother's health and the publicity of a trial?

Publicity? "Alleged member of the Mafia." Those words haunted Sarah. If she didn't clear her father's name, the legacy of his murder would be passed along to her sons. She knew about newspaper morgues and that her own obituary would include, "daughter of Bart Mindel, murdered . . ."

Again Sarah considered the outrageous possibility that Bart had been a member of the syndicate. Then, more certain than ever of his innocence, she concluded that if he'd been a gang member, he would have left a larger estate. He'd willed his wife a quarter of a million dollars, not millions.

There would be no peace of mind until Sarah answered, at least for herself, the questions about her father's character. She wondered if there was anyone alive who could provide answers. Maybe Bob knew more about Bart's death than he'd ever mentioned, wanting to shield her feelings.

Sarah toyed with the idea of calling Bob at the office. That would be foolish; he'd either tell her he was too busy to talk, or his secretary would say he was in court, even if that wasn't true. She'd tried that once, and Lorraine had hung up on her after announcing, "I'm his wife, now. Stop calling him." Sarah had redialed the number and let the phone ring and ring while she vacuumed the living room carpet. She'd never dialed her old phone number again and was unwilling to do so now, or ever.

She wished her cousin Zack was still alive. He'd known more about Uncle Bart's business than either Sarah or her mother. He might not have had the answers, but Sarah was sure he would have listened to the questions.

Plumping up the pillows and leaning back into them, Sarah's brow wrinkled in concentration as she traced the facts she did know. The police had found her father's wallet; the three hundred dollars inside still intact, so it definitely wasn't robbery. Searching for answers, she remembered Benji Schapiro, a friend of her father's. Zack, or someone, had said that Benji and Bart drove around in a taxi for hours the night Bart was murdered. Why were they meeting in a cab and not in Bart's office? What did Sarah know about Benji? She'd only met him once. Her father had sent her to him when she was selling encyclopedias. She'd walked to his big two-story house only a block from her mother's, and timidly knocked on the door. Benji, a big, powerfully built man, with black eyes and hair, had invited her in. His wife had served Sarah tea and butter cookies as she'd sat uncomfortably on the edge of an Italian baroque inlaid divan.

Sarah remembered that cluttered room filled with an elaborately framed sacred heart of Jesus, a framed papal blessing, and a plaster bust of Dante. The house reeked of onions and garlic, and Mrs. Schapiro excused herself to "stir the spaghetti."

Benji bought two sets of encyclopedias, one for his daughter who still lived at home, and one for his ten-year-old grandson. Those two were the only sets Sarah ever sold.

Amused at the details her memory provided, Sarah wondered why she remembered such meaningless, insignificant details. She slumped flat down on her back, closed her eyes and whispered, "Daddy, Daddy, please help me. Tell me what I need to know." In the recesses of her memory, Sarah heard Bart say, "Yeah, Benji's a member of the syndicate, but I'm not. Benji's my friend and protector. Nobody crosses Benji."

By 12:30 P.M. the pressure on Sarah's bladder forced her out of bed. In the bathroom she splashed cold water on her swollen, blood-shot eyes, and avoided looking in the mirror. In the kitchen she stood at the open refrigerator door, eyeing the contents.

In disgust, she slammed the door; there was nothing in the fridge but food. Sarah's insatiable hunger could not find nourishment in an "ice box."

Sarah turned the gas on under the kettle and stood on one foot, and then the other, waiting for the water to boil; questioning why her father needed protection and why Benji was his protector. The whistle blew and Sarah turned off the gas, poured steaming water over the chamomile tea bag, and carried the mug to the glass-topped table. She sat down, sipped her tea, and tried logical reasoning.

Liquor was legal before Prohibition; her tavern-owner grandfather had been a respected member of the community. During Prohibition, Al Capone and his mobsters muscled in and sold illegal liquor. Sarah knew about that from watching Edward G. Robinson movies with her father. Bart, a tavern-keeper like his father before him, had more obstacles to overcome.

Sarah remembered one of her father's frequent complaints: "Your grandpa never had to pay anyone off—well, maybe a cup of coffee and a free lunch for the cop who walked the beat. The 'bag-men' I have to pay off are royal pains in the ass. One of those bums came into the joint today and I had to cough up the money for jukebox rental. That pisses me off; I own my own juke, and I'm forced to rent one from the mob. If I don't pay up, the police would close my taverns in the blink of an eye. The police and the mob work hand-in-glove—I should say, hand-in-my pocket. Crooks figure out ways to screw the independent businessman. Those bastards, I think I'm working my ass for you and your mother but the truth is, I'm busting my balls for hoods and cops. Damn them to hell. I hate their form of 'protection.'"

There was that word again. Bart said Benji gave him protection. What if the B-girls who lived in the rooms above the DOG HOUSE were prostitutes? Did the mob want part of the action and Bart refused to comply? Was that reason enough to have him killed?

Sarah covered her face with her hands, her elbows cold against the glass-topped table, her heart cold and empty with loss. Her mother might have answers, but asking her

was out of the question. Was there anyone alive who knew the answers? Madeline would. Bart said, “Madeline pays off the ‘bag-men’ if I’m not around when they show up.”

Sarah trembled at the thought of talking to Madeline. Her father’s mistress had insulted the whole family when she showed up at the funeral home. Sarah remembered her outrage, but now she had more understanding. If Madeline was still alive and willing to talk to her, Sarah feared she might hear something she’d rather not know.

Back to the facts. Sarah remembered asking the police chief about the investigation and he’d replied, “There just isn’t enough evidence to continue the search.” The police had reported that the grass behind the bushes had been trampled. She’d seen that evidence herself. At the time, she’d been sorry she’d walked into the back yard and observed the grass lying flat as if someone had knelt behind the bushes. The police chief had told her there were finger prints on the back of the Caddy, “But that doesn’t mean anything. Lots of people touch the car when you stop for gas.”

Did the police ever interrogate Benji or the cab driver? The newspapers stated: “The body was riddled with bullets.” When Sarah read that, she’d wadded the newspaper and threw it in the fireplace. Sarah wondered if Josh still had those old clippings and if she could bear reading them. Riddled with bullets? That sounded like a Mafia slaying. But why? Sarah’s fist jabbed across her mouth; now she knew why the casket was closed.

Sarah stood, carried her mug to the kitchen sink, then paced back and forth between the kitchen and living room like a caged animal, obsessed with her thoughts. Ralph had said, “Mourn for your father, not for the way he died,” but he was only half right. As far as Sarah was concerned, the way Bart died was inseparable from his death.

A familiar melody may trigger a memory. The faintest odor of spring lilacs and Sarah remembered her mother’s garden and the porcelain vase atop the piano, overflowing with cut lilacs, their fragrance sweetening the room. Now as she walked toward the bedroom, her eyes rested on a bud vase containing one rose. The flower had

faded and dropped petals on the desk. Sarah removed what remained of the wilted yellow rose and remembered . . .

* * *

Bart lay on his back in bed, his head propped up on double pillows. The black stubble of his beard a sharp contrast to the pallor of his complexion. Sarah stood next to the bed, looked down at her father and asked, “Why are you in bed, Daddy? You never even go to bed with a cold. You always dress and sneeze your way through the day. The only other time I remember you in bed was the day I brought you the frozen rose.”

Bart and Sarah grinned at her reference and he managed a chuckle, “Yeah,” he said, “you were convinced the rose was real because the stem had thorns, and I had to convince you that some rascal had put a real stem on a wax rose. Are you still gullible, Sarah?”

“I’m still gullible, I guess, but not that gullible. The twins are in the kitchen with Mom. Should I bring them in here to see you?”

“Not now, Baby. I’m just too tired. Your mother didn’t want to worry you, but the night before last a masked man—don’t look at me like that, Sarah, it wasn’t the Lone Ranger,” Bart chuckled half-heartedly. He sighed and continued, “I was leaving for work about 7:00, it was still light outside, and this S.O.B. jumped out of a car and waved his gun at me. I saw him in the rear-view mirror. I was sitting in the Caddy with the key in the ignition. I started the engine, threw the car in reverse, jammed my foot on the gas peddle, and backed out like a bat out of hell. The car door was still wide open. I aimed straight for that masked man. He sure ran like hell! He jumped back in the moving car—someone else was at the wheel—and the car sped away before I could get a license number.

“I just can’t believe that some punk would try to rob me in broad daylight. The Caddy bounced backward across the curb and front lawn before I could brake. You can still see the tire tracks; take a look when you leave. Your mother heard the commotion

and was watching from the front door as I backed over her precious lawn. She was so glad to see me alive, she didn't even bitch about my messing up."

"Oh, Daddy," Sarah whimpered, "how scary. How awful." She bent over her father and kissed the top of his bald head, "You mean you've been here in bed for two whole days and I didn't even know? Why didn't Mom tell me? I would have come right over."

"She didn't want to worry you," Bart repeated, and then added, "Besides, this is nothing to worry your pretty head about. It's over. I handled it. I always do."

"What do you mean, 'always do,' Daddy?"

"Don't you remember when we returned home after one of our Florida jaunts and found the glass window in the front door shattered, and the safe in the den blown wide open?" Bart laughed without feeling, "Ha, ha, the joke was on them. There was nothing in the safe. That safe was just a front in case they were interested in ripping me off. I outsmarted them that time, too."

"Daddy, you're laughing like this is some kind of joke. This is serious. You could have been hurt. Is there some way you can protect yourself so this won't happen again?"

"From now on, I'm carrying my gun—I've got a license—. . ." Bart stopped in mid-sentence, aware of the expression on his daughter's face. "I'm fine, Baby, honest. I just need a little rest. I'll admit that the incident shook me up, but with cirrhosis, the doctor said I should get more rest anyway."

"Cirrhosis? Daddy, what are you talking about?"

"Didn't your mother tell you? The doctor diagnosed that last month."

"Last month? You've been sick for a month and I didn't even know? Why doesn't Mom ever tell me anything?"

"Don't be hard on your mother, Honey. She's the one who needs protection—and if I'm not around to give it to her—I'm depending on you."

* * *

Sarah tore the cellophane wrap from a fresh pack of cigarettes, fingered open the silver foiled lining, removed one, and lit it. That “incident” happened about a month before Bart died. Maybe it wasn’t an attempted robbery, but a warning. Did Bart have a premonition that he’d soon die? Was that why he told his daughter to take care of her mother?

The police had given Bart’s gun to Sarah after his death, so Sarah knew he’d carried one after that threat on his life. Why the police had given Zack her father’s shoes, she’d never know.

Sarah, terrified of that gun, fearful that the twins might find it and harm themselves, had begged Bob to remove it from the house. When he ignored her repeated requests, she wrapped it in layers and layers of newspaper and buried it in the garbage can in the alley. Later when she told Bob what she’d done, he shouted, “You damn fool! Don’t you know guns have serial numbers? If the wrong person finds that gun and uses it, that gun could be traced to you.”

As far as Sarah knew, no one had ever found it, and she felt no regret about *that* decision. Guns, pistols, shotguns had always terrified her, even before Bart’s death. The farmer who’d kicked her blocks shot rabbits and birds. He’d carry his shotgun hoisted up to his shoulder with one hand, his other hand clutching his prey, while the dead quarry dripped blood across the path as he walked toward the farm kitchen. Consciously, Sarah had no memory of that, but her anxiety increased. Torturing herself with details, Sarah felt compelled to search out any clue to Bart’s murder; but what difference would it make? He might have died from cirrhosis that same year.

Sarah slipped out of bed, traipsed into the living room, and removed the *Family Medical Guide* from the bookshelf. She lugged the heavy volume back to bed and located cirrhosis in the index. Turning to the page, she read: “Cirrhosis of the liver is relatively common, especially among heavy drinkers . . . the disease may eventually cause liver failure, especially if the patient continues to drink.”

The book lay open across Sarah's thighs, one hand holding her place as she considered again the possibility that her father might have died from natural causes. Bart had assured Sarah, "Cirrhosis is no big deal. Just means I can't eat candy anymore." Now Sarah knew better.

For several years she'd been fascinated by articles on alcoholism that appeared in woman's magazines from time to time. She found alcoholism and alcoholics repulsive and wondered at her interest. More than once in the last year she'd questioned her mother about her father's drinking habits. Each time El became feisty, "Liquor was your father's business. He had to drink with his customers, that's how he earned his living." If Sarah pressed for a further explanation, Elizabeth would sputter, "Someone's at the door," and hang up.

Now that Sarah lived in the single's world, she was aware, from what her friends told her, that some bartenders never touched a drop of liquor. That selling booze was one thing, drinking it was another. Her mother's explanation, always repeated verbatim, had Sarah wondering if she really believed what she said, or was denying reality as usual.

Sarah knew from experience that her father was a heavy drinker. She remembered the nights she'd smelled whiskey on his breath and listened to him gag and vomit in the bathroom. But did that mean he was an alcoholic? No, definitely not; he didn't drink every day from morning to night. Besides, Bart was Jewish, and Jews weren't alcoholics.

Sarah thought about the many times her father mysteriously disappeared for days. When he'd return, he'd shrug off his wife's anger with, "No big deal. So I went on a bender. You know I do that from time to time. All men do. I had to sleep it off and soak it out at the baths. I'd never come home if I wasn't sober. I'd offend your ladyship."

"Well, at least you could have called to let me know you wouldn't be coming home!" Elizabeth raged.

Bart always answered defiantly, without apology, “How many years have we been married? I’d think by now you’d know that once in a while I have too much to drink with one of my customers and wind up soaking out the booze at the steam baths.”

Deep in thought, Sarah held the edge of her thumbnail to the groove between her front teeth, unaware she was mimicking a habit of Elizabeth’s. She was amazed at the information available to her; now that she gave credence to her ability to recall dialogue and scenes from the past. Did all men go on benders? Bob certainly had.

After the twins moved away from home, Bob ruined every Christmas Eve by coming home late for dinner. He’d arrive, half-crocked, all grins and giggling like an idiot, “So I’m late. So what! No big deal. Dan and I met for lunch to celebrate the holidays and we had a couple of martini’s and, well, one thing led to another. I’m home now,” he’d snicker and make a grab for Sarah.

She’d push him away and shout, “You smell like a brewery. Get away from me!”

Bob’s good humor would then turn to rage and he’d shout, “Your head’s screwed on backwards. You smell one drop of whiskey on my breath and you assume I’m drunk. I can hold my liquor. Next thing you’ll accuse me of being an alcoholic!” Bob roared, turned on his heel, tripped up the stairs, and slammed the bedroom door behind him before collapsing in bed.

Bob, hung over on Christmas morning, would half-heartedly open his presents. Edgy and irritable if Sarah suggested that he’d had too much to drink, he’d lay on the couch all afternoon and brood, while Sarah bustled around the kitchen preparing Christmas dinner. By the time the twins and their other guests arrived, Bob would be sipping a martini, all smiles, and nothing more would be mentioned about his drinking habits until the next time he went on a bender.

Sarah held a glass under the spigot and filled it with cold water. She twisted the faucet to off and slowly sipped the water. She didn’t guzzle, like her husband and father; they both swilled their drinks. Her mind flashed back to the night her parents had come to visit the newlyweds in the “Poo House.”

* * *

Bart arrived carrying a shopping bag filled with two bottles of Cutty Sark and a half dozen bottles of Coke. “The Cokes are for you and your mother, Sarah,” he announced. “Get four water glasses for us and I’ll pour.” After several hours of steady drinking, Bart and Bob matching drink for drink, they both were talking gibberish when they weren’t out-bragging one another.

“Naw, I can hold my liquor better than you can,” Bart said, waving his hand in front of his son-in-law’s face. Within minutes Bob repeated the same words in reverse. By midnight, both men were stupefied, and Elizabeth, disgusted with her husband’s behavior, pushed him backward on the couch, untied his shoelaces, and removed his shoes. She covered him with the blanket Sarah fetched and announced, “Let him sleep it off. I’m going home. I’ll be back for him in the morning.”

Sarah half dragged and half pushed Bob into their bedroom. She shoved him down backwards on the bed, untied his shoelaces, removed his shoes, and covered him with a blanket. He remained fully clothed, like Bart, and slept on top of the bedspread. Sarah’s reaction and action, a replica of her mothers.

Returning to the living room, Sarah recovered her father who’d kicked off his blanket, locked the front door, and turned out the overhead light in the living room. She locked the back door, slipped into her nightie in the bathroom, turned off the bathroom and kitchen lights, and groped her way into the bedroom to face the inevitable. She slipped under the spread and blanket and moved as far away from Bob as possible without falling out of bed. The room reeked of whiskey and smelled as offensive as the monkey pavilion at Brookfield Zoo. Sarah felt sick to her stomach.

* * *

Feeling defiled by her past and her present, Sarah walked into the bathroom and poured bubble bath under hot running water. She sat on the toilet, waiting for the tub to fill, ruminating on the *they* and *them* her father had mentioned. A shy smile curled the corners of her lips; wasn’t she a bit old to be playing Nancy Drew? Her frown returned

with the realization that Bart's death was not a murder mystery written for children, but a deadly serious adult concern.

The bathtub filled, Sarah turned off the faucet, pulled her sleeveless cotton nightie over her head, and dropped it in the wicker hamper. She stepped into the water gingerly and lowered her rear into the tub. She sat quietly until she could tolerate the water temperature, then soaked her wash cloth and rung it out. She adjusted the cloth behind her neck and back before she slumped back against the porcelain tub.

The stress of grieving and her lack of food had produced a pulsating throb across Sarah's forehead; the physical discomfort added to her mental anguish. Her melancholy lingered like a cold after the seventh day. She smoothed bubbling foam up and over her breasts, sunk deeper into the tub, and with deliberate effort forced herself to stop brooding. She searched her memory for one of the happy times spent with her father. The shopping spree on her twenty-first birthday. The wrestling matches. One incident finally brought a smile.

* * *

Elizabeth opened the screen door and shouted from the screened-in porch, "Will you two stop running around the back yard screaming like maniacs! You're both giving me a splitting headache. I asked you two to paint the porch furniture, not each other!" Bart and Sarah both ignored Elizabeth's complaints as Bart chased his teen-age daughter around the yard waving a wet paint brush, threatening to paint her face, her arms, and her legs, bared beneath her summer shorts.

Sarah's wet paint brush, aimed at her father's bald head, made it's mark and they were both splattered with blue enamel before they stopped horsing around and resumed painting the furniture. They joked away the afternoon and continued their teasing and laughter as their eyes teared from turpentine fumes and their skin stung from cleaning up after their duel in the sun.

* * *

Sarah's smile of remembrance faded abruptly; never again would she have the pleasure of her father's companionship, or hear his hearty laughter. Tears of loss and abandonment dripped silently down her cheeks and chin; she didn't bother to wipe them away.

Her nose running, she sat up, reached for a towel, and blew her nose into it. She threw the soiled towel across the room and it landed on the tile floor. She would just drip across the bathroom and fetch a clean towel, when or if she ever got out of the tub.

She turned on the hot water faucet and let it run until the bath water warmed, then resumed her horizontal position. Once again, she searched for happy memories. She reminisced about the "movie dates" both father and daughter enjoyed; although the flicks Bart chose frightened teen-age Sarah half to death. They'd held hands through *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. They'd seen every Frankenstein and Dracula movie ever made. They'd watched all the gangster movies starring Edward G. Robinson; and every time Bart would say, "He's a good actor; spunky and pint-sized, just like me."

Every other week, Bart and Sarah saw the "early show" and Elizabeth waved them off saying, "I don't understand what you two see in those horror and gangster movies, but have fun anyway." Sarah could feel Elizabeth's glare on her back as they left the house, but nothing and no one could ruin the pleasure of having Bart's sole attention. Off they'd go to the Parthenon or the Paramount in downtown Hammond, and watch one or the other B-movies about Egyptian mummies or disaster films about hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, or out-of-control infernos. Once in a great while they'd watch a Hope and Crosby road film. Bart refused to see *The Lost Weekend* with Ray Milland. The film was a visual depiction of alcoholic deterioration. The movie had become a classic and now Sarah knew why Bart had refused to see it.

During the films Bart chose to see he laughed, cried, or faked shivers and shakes in the horror movies. He'd hold Sarah's hand when one or the other wasn't stuffing their mouth with buttered popcorn. They'd drop the empty cardboard containers under the seat, just like everyone else. By the time they left the auditorium, Sarah's hands were

sticky from popcorn and Jujubes and she'd say, "Excuse me, Daddy, I have to go to the ladies room."

Back in the Caddy for the short drive home, Sarah would thank Bart profusely for taking her to the movies. She'd already thanked him in the darkened theater as they exited, and again in the lobby. "I'd rather go to the movies with you, Daddy, than have a date with any high school boy. Because," she'd giggle, "when I'm with you I don't feel embarrassed when I have to go to the john."

Bart spent quality time with Sarah. "Your fun to be with," he'd say, after one of their "dates." He spent less time with her when she was a child, but even then, he'd allow her to tag along. She'd seen the inside of a pawn shop before she was ten, and had been introduced to the owner. Bart wasn't pawning anything, he was buying unreclaimed diamonds, "for security."

Bart took his "darling daughter" to the barber shop; he had a shave, haircut, and manicure while Sarah watched the action. He took her to his DOG HOUSE office, and in the bar he pointed out the spittoon and cash register that he'd inherited from *his* father.

Sarah was an apple-cheeked teen-ager when Bart escorted her to the wrestling matches. He treated her like the favored son while he booed the referee, cheered when "his guy" cheated, or swore and cursed the opponent if he cheated once too often. Just getting out of the house after dinner to attend a wrestling match was a tussle. "It's a weeknight, Bart," Elizabeth would scold. "Sarah has homework. Besides, ladies don't attend wrestling matches."

On Sarah's "sweet sixteen" birthday, Bart whirled his daughter around a pocket-sized dance floor after the *Chez Paree's* featured entertainment. Jimmy Durante got laughs, or was it Sophie Tucker who mesmerized the audience? At a wrestling match, Bart treated Sarah like his son; at a nightclub, he treated her like a woman, a girlfriend, holding the door open, helping Sarah on and off with her coat. Behaving like the perfect gentleman, Bart frequently reminded Sarah, "Any boy you date better treat you right, or I'll belt him one on the nose."

Spending time with Bart, whether Elizabeth was with them or not, guaranteed a “fun time.” Bart gave Sarah his undivided attention; more attention than Josh or Johnny ever received from their father. Sure, once a year Bob allowed one of his sons to accompany him on his annual fishing trip—taking both kids was “too much trouble.” The boys were never invited to tag along with their father while he shopped at the hardware or liquor stores. They’d never been allowed a visit to their father’s office. Bob never chauffeured them anywhere. It was Sarah who drove the twins to doctor and dentist appointments. It was Sarah who attended their football games and cheered when Johnny made a touchdown, or Josh made a stunning tackle that won the game. “I’m too damn busy to waste my time on freshman football,” Bob shouted, whenever Sarah urged him to spend more time with his sons.

Sarah had soaked in the bathtub for so long, her fingers were as ruffled as her mind. She wondered why she’d always thought her father had no time for her. She played with that concept for a while, then recalled her mother shouting, “Bart, *you* never have time for *me*, or your daughter!” and she understood.

Since Bart’s death, Sarah had magnified and glorified his humor and talent. Until recently, she’d ignored the times he’d raged at her, whether she deserved it or not—she seldom did. Grieving over the loss of her father, Sarah blinked away his broken promises and temperamental behavior.

Sitting up, Sarah drained an inch of tepid water and replaced it with hot before she once again reclined in the tub. She felt anything but relaxed. One minute of smiles, then tears; Sarah was as moody as her father. Bart’s mood swings were instantaneous and unpredictable. One second he’d howl with laughter, and the next, enraged, he’d snarl like a caged animal.

Bart was emotional, sentimental, impulsive, and controlling. He was also fun-loving, exciting, and high on life. He was a man born before his time. If he’d been young in the sixties, without a doubt, he’d have been a hippie like Josh. Bart had often

bragged to Sarah, “Yeah, I led a Conga line down Hollywood Boulevard on New Year’s Eve. I wore a loin cloth and nothing else.”

Bart was audacious, fearless, and self-reliant; he had to be top dog, at least that’s the way Sarah perceived him. She thought he was as powerful as his bass voice. That deep, resonant sound in anger scared the hell out of Sarah. He used that force to vent anger or intimidate anyone who crossed him, whether it was an employee, a repairman, his wife, or his daughter. Short men often overcompensate.

Sarah remembered Bart using his giant’s voice one Halloween afternoon. He’d smiled and shoved a half dollar at the “trick-or-treaters.” The two young toughs grabbed their coins and ran, calling over their shoulders, “Mindel’s a tight wad!” Bart chased those kids for a city block and when he caught up with them at the corner, he bellowed, “If what I gave you wasn’t enough, you punks can just give me back my money!” And they did; then they ran for their lives.

Sarah had stuffed her feelings for so long, most of the time she didn’t know what she felt. A long, sorrowful day had disrupted her carefully constructed yet crippling defenses. Her life-long habit of suppressing feelings had been replaced with a deep knowing. Intuitively she knew that if she didn’t find relief, her very survival was at risk. Her “tomorrow will be better” philosophy had run its course. It had left her stranded and desolate on the shore of misery.

Sarah kicked furiously at the sheet and bolted out of bed. She dashed into the living room, rummaged through the top drawer of her desk, and located the card Gloria had given her. At five minutes to five, she dialed the psychologist’s number and made an appointment to see Carla Baskin, Ph.D.

CHAPTER 38

Sarah followed Dr. Baskin into her very private office and the psychologist closed the double doors behind her. Sarah wondered if anyone was ever stuck between the doors; she felt stuck—glued to her past.

“Excuse me a minute,” the therapist said, as she walked to her desk, piled high with folders and books. “I have to write a note before we begin.” Dr. Baskin pointed to overstuffed, oversized pillows scattered on the carpet, “Make yourself comfortable,” she said. “I’ll be right with you.”

The leather squeaked as Sarah folded herself onto a bright yellow pillow. It squeaked again as she settled into it and propped her woven handbag against the side, as if it was her purse that needed support. Sarah wished she’d chosen one of the plush velvet cushions, but she stayed seated on the pillow she’d chosen. Her back ached, and she felt nervous and uncomfortable as she stared at the azure carpet, cut in high/low irregular tufts.

Everything in Dr. Baskin’s office invited inspection. Floor pillows rather than chairs; that Sarah understood. What she couldn’t fathom was the reason for the mattress pushed against the wall in the far corner of the sizable office. Tacked high above the blue-ticked mattress cover, a mola—an anomalous pattern of orange, black, and blue—hung off center.

The appliquéd mola and all the framed posters that decorated every wall of the oblong room were hung at distracting high/low levels. The unusual spacing annoyed Sarah. Were the posters hung high so the therapist could view them seated at her desk, while her lowly clients, seated on the carpet, could view a few at eye level? Sarah

couldn't stand and sit simultaneously, so her view was limited. Obviously, one's perspective changed with the point of view.

Sarah's miseries—today, yesterday, and the days before—precluded any chance for happiness. Everyone wears a protective mask from time-to-time to hide their feelings; Sarah had worn hers for a lifetime. Now her winsome smiling mask had slipped and her face revealed her ever-prevalent despair.

She turned sideways on the squeaking pillow to check out the wall behind her. A poster, hung at eye level with print so fine she couldn't read it, intrigued her. She reached into her purse for her glasses, adjusted them over her nose, and twisted completely around to read:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can
And the wisdom to know the difference.”

Touched by the prayer, Sarah wondered if she had the courage to change—*really change*. She heard a rustle behind her and turned on her squeaky pillow in time to see the therapist walk toward her.

“I'm sorry I kept you waiting,” Dr. Baskin said, as she dragged an orange leather pillow across the carpet and parked the cushion and herself across from Sarah. Her cushion squeaked, too, as she crossed her legs in a semi-yoga position.

Dr. Baskin's heavy-lidded, brown eyes looked warm and concerned as she said, “You look so uncomfortable. Why don't you drag your pillow closer to the wall and rest your back against it.”

“Thanks, I will.” Sarah tucked her glasses back into her purse, stood, and dragged a velvet cushion to the wall and resettled. Her attention now focused on the therapist, not the squeaking leather, she eyed the woman with interest. The doctor's clothing seemed

bizarre for a professional. Obviously, she lacked taste — in clothing as well as office decor.

Carla Baskin, Ph.D., wore a multicolored, ankle length cotton skirt and a checkered cotton blouse, open at the throat. A woven Eye-of-God hung from a braided leather strap and dangled between her heavy breasts. Her unshaven legs were exposed as she sat cross-legged and the Birkenstocks on her bare feet had comfort worn into them.

Is she really a Ph.D.? Sarah wondered. Maybe she was an eccentric poet and just did therapy on the side. With her hairy legs, she was a feminist, that's for sure. The whole scene seemed surreal. As far as Sarah was concerned, everyone in L.A. was nuts, including herself.

"Before we begin, I have some ground rules I want to share with you," the therapist said. "I want to assure you, Sarah, that anything you say in this room will remain here. This room is soundproof, and the doors are double thick. If you want to lie on the mattress and kick your feet and scream, no one will hear you."

Have a tantrum! With an audience? Not on your life. This woman was crazy. Taking Gloria's advice was crazy, too. Glo was born in Los Angeles, this was her style of therapy, not Sarah's. Dr. Guthrie, her Chicago psychiatrist, had sat on a chair behind his desk and presented himself as a professional and behaved like one. Sarah felt like a fool wasting her money on this office visit. She twisted her hands in her lap, her expression tense and fearful, her mouth clamped shut.

"I require total honesty," Dr. Baskin continued, "not only from you, but from me. I lied. I didn't need to write that note. I wanted you to have the opportunity to feel comfortable in your surroundings before we began this session. I also wanted to observe your reaction to this room. You have a curious and inquiring mind, assets that will help you in therapy. How do you feel about honesty?"

"Honesty means a lot to me. The only person I've ever lied to is myself."

"You have insight, too. That's another plus. We're off to a good start. How did you hear about me?"

“My friend, and your patient, Gloria Roth, recommended you months ago. I knew then I needed therapy, but I put it off because I really can’t afford it. But now I’m in so much emotional pain, I couldn’t put it off any longer, no matter the cost.”

“We’ll discuss your financial resources at the end of the session. For now, let’s concentrate on you, your problems, and how I can be of help. And Sarah, please call me Carla.”

Carla! Most Ph.D.’s hung on to their doctor titles like the M.D.’s did. Sarah was impressed.

“You look frightened. Are you afraid, Sarah?” Carla asked, her rugged features softened with compassion. Understanding bordered her eyes as she repeated, “Are you afraid? You look like you want to cry.”

“Afraid? Yes. I’ve been fearful most of my life, but fear has never stopped me from doing what I thought was important. I’m a mess. I need help. I’ve been divorced, evicted, and lost my job, all in less than a week, but I survived. I’m trying to get my life back together after the failure of a twenty-six-year marriage. I earn my living, as pitiful as it is. I have a black lover, almost young enough to be my son. I just don’t understand why I’m falling apart now, when I’ve survived so much. My father was murdered when I was twenty-two. Last week I mourned . . .”

Sarah’s lower lip pouted like a child’s as she tried to contain her tears. “Dr. Baskin, I mean, Carla,” she said, and could contain the tears no longer. Words and tears, broken sentences and sobs erupted from Sarah like toothpaste squeezed hard from the bottom of the tube.

Carla shoved a tissue box across the rug toward Sarah and sat quietly observing her patient until Sarah looked up and whimpered, “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to feel sorry about. That’s a lot of shit to come down on you.”

“You just used my favorite word,” Sarah grinned. Then, serious again, she said, “I’m full of shit and so is my life, but I’m beginning to believe you might help me sort it out.”

“Trust your feelings. Trust yourself, Sarah. You’re safe here. You can reveal your thoughts and feelings to me and not be judged.”

“I don’t know what I feel. I’m more confused and depressed than the day of my divorce. I’m a puzzle with a missing piece. My shadow has more substance than I do. I feel invisible most of the time. I talk a mile a minute . . . like I’m doing now . . . and I can’t seem to stop myself. I can’t slow down or stop running. I . . .”

“Sarah,” Carla interrupted, “take a deep breath.”

“I can’t. I haven’t been able to take a deep breath in my life. I couldn’t whistle when I was a child, and I still can’t.” Sarah squirmed in discomfort and changed the subject saying, “I like that framed prayer.”

“That’s the AA serenity prayer. I rephrase the last line. Rather than wisdom, I say ‘the honesty to know the difference.’ Honesty is the antithesis of denial. When we give up denial, we can acknowledge the problem and make choices. That’s the process you began when you gave up denial and acknowledged your father’s murder. I’ve had to give up denial, too, Sarah. I’m an alcoholic. A dry-alcoholic. I haven’t had a drink in ten years. You look shocked. Does my disease offend you?”

“I didn’t know alcoholism was considered a disease. I’m not shocked; nothing shocks me anymore, but I am amazed you could label yourself like that.”

“I face reality, Sarah. I’m an alcoholic. I can’t change that fact, but I can change my response to it by choosing not to take the first drink. The difference, Sarah, between the ‘serenity to accept the things I cannot change, and the courage to change the things I can.’”

Sarah caught every other word the therapist said and responded, “I don’t know much about alcoholism, but I value your honesty. Honesty is a rare quality these days.”

“You have insight and courage. Tell me why you doubt yourself.”

“Everyone but my mother says I have courage because I drove alone half-way across the country when I left my husband. But I sure don’t have any courage when it comes to my mother. One phone call from her and my stomach feels like an accordion.”

“Your mother wired you, Sarah. She knows what buttons to push.”

“Boy, does she ever,” Sarah grinned, liking the therapist even more. “What I don’t understand, Carla, is why I’m falling apart now when the worst is over, when I’ve managed for years to hold myself together.”

“You’re a survivor. You’ve been so busy surviving, you haven’t had time to consider yourself or your own behavior. Now you’re facing reality and that’s painful. There’s a lot of anguish in giving up denial.”

“No wonder I stayed in denial for so long; it’s pure agony facing reality.”

“I’m going to ask you a question. Don’t pause to think, Sarah, just say the first thing that pops to mind. What was the major turning point in your life?”

“That’s easy. When I almost died after botched-up surgery. When I recovered I knew I had to change my life.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, but it took time. I finally did leave an unhappy marriage; but now I’m as miserable as I was when I was married to that bastard. Now Bob’s not around to blame for my unhappiness, so the misery must be in me.”

Covering her face with her hands, Sarah lamented, “I carry my wretchedness with me no matter where I live. I want to change. I really do. Can I?” she asked, as she looked at Carla for reassurance.

“A slave who asks his master for freedom is not ready for it. Do you understand?”

Sarah nodded her head up and down in response and then paraphrased, “You mean I have to find my own answers and not look to others for approval. Is that right? Damn, I just did it again!” Sarah laughed, “I look for approval from every authority figure. I’m hopeless.”

“No, Sarah, you are not hopeless. In fact, you’re very responsive. You caught yourself immediately when you asked for my approval the second time. You are an excellent candidate for therapy. With therapy, awareness grows, and awareness is the

key to making changes. You've shared more of yourself today than most of my clients do in months."

Sarah sighed and said, "God, if I can change, anyone can."

"You'll do fine, but you have a lot of work ahead of you. Are you willing to risk the time, energy, and money?"

"I have no other choice. I can't go on like this."

"We all have choices."

"I never have. I never cause anything, I just react."

"We'll talk more about choice next time," the psychologist said, as she rose to her feet and Sarah stood up on cue. Carla walked to her desk and Sarah observed the woman's demeanor, her straight back and her shining gold-spun top-knot. Aware now that it didn't matter how the therapist dressed, what mattered was her compassion and understanding. Sarah felt safe with her. Dr. Baskin picked up a folder from her crowded desk and removed several sheets of paper stapled together. She turned back to Sarah and handed them to her, "I have homework for you," she said. "This is a 'Life Script Form.' There are no right or wrong answers. Just fill in the blanks with the first thought that pops into your head. I'd like them returned to me at your next session. You do want another appointment?"

"Yes, when do you suggest I return?"

"Can you afford to see me once a week?"

"I can't afford not to see you, but my funds are limited. I still receive \$100 a week from my husband . . . uh . . . ex-husband. I earn \$74.00 a week from my part-time job, and periodically I earn extra money with art sales or commissions, and interest on my savings. God, I don't know what I can afford. What do you think?"

"My regular fee is \$50.00 for a fifty-minute hour, as I told you on the phone, so today give me \$50.00 as you expected to. The following sessions will be \$35.00. Will that be satisfactory?"

Sarah dug into her purse for her checkbook and glanced at her watch hung from her key-ring. She wrote out the check, handed it to the therapist, and said, “Thank you, Carla. Thank you very much. You’ve given me way over fifty minutes today, and you’ll be charging me less next time, why?”

“Because you’re worth it, Sarah. Believe it. Now let’s discuss the date and time.”

That evening Sarah reported to Gloria, “Thanks for recommending Carla. I really like her.” She didn’t mention her therapist at all when Ralph arrived for the weekend, and she ignored the Life Script Form until the night before her next session.

On Monday night Sarah sat at her desk, pen poised in hand, prepared to write her first thought. The first few questions were easy: name; birth date; parents living or dead? By the time she reached question number six, she knew this was no ordinary questionnaire.

6. Name the important grown-ups in your childhood.

Sarah filled in the blank with Grandma, Aunt Esther. Lois.

Sarah hadn’t written mother or father, yet she included Lois. Her cousin was definitely not a grown-up when Sarah was a child; she was only three and a half years older. As children, they’d been as close as sisters, yet Sarah hadn’t thought about her cousin in years. Did Lois even know about the divorce? Of course she’d know, Aunt Esther, her mother the know-it-all, would have spilled the beans—with relish.

7. Outside of your immediate family, who have you admired and respected? Who are your heroes/heroines?

Without hesitation, Sarah wrote: Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, and Claire Booth Luce.

Until Sarah filled that blank, she hadn’t realized the extent of her admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt. Sarah had read the “great lady’s” autobiography before she’d ever

left Vanderville. She'd been impressed with her honesty and candor. Sarah doubted that she would ever have enough spunk to reveal herself so publicly. Sarah identified with Eleanor Roosevelt. They'd both had miserable childhoods, yet Eleanor had accomplished more than any other First Lady, while her husband, the cheat, was President of the United States. Mrs. Roosevelt had written about her husband's betrayal: "I forgave, but I'll never forget."

Forgive Bob? Forget his betrayal? *Never!*

Sarah understood why she'd written King's name on the form, but Claire Booth Luce? Well, Claire was a multitalented woman—an author, playwright, ambassador to Italy, and married to Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* magazine. For a woman to accomplish all that, when she'd grown up in an atmosphere of "A woman's place is in the home" was really something. Sarah was multitalented, too, but she didn't own her accomplishments. Sarah thought she'd be content if her one talent, art, received public attention and praise. Then she could feel secure and loved.

8. *Who is someone you dislike intensely? Why?*

Mr. Sivad. He called me a liar.

9. *What was the family story about your birth?*

That my mother almost died giving birth to me. Grandma said, "We weren't planning on you, Sarah, so you slept in a dresser drawer."

10. *What kind of person are you?*

A survivor.

11. *What was your mother's favorite saying about life?*

“Children are to be seen and not heard.” “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” “If you can’t say something good, don’t say anything.” “See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.”

12. *How did your mother criticize you?*

Every way.

13. *How did your mother praise you?*

Ha! Ha!

14. *When your mother was upset, how did she show it?*

If she could move, she scrubbed the floor. If not, she laid in bed and stared at the ceiling without speaking. It didn’t occur to Sarah to write, “by beating me.”

15. *What did you do when your mother was upset?*

Stayed out of her way, or tried to comfort her.

16. *What was her advice to you about the world?*

“Men are only after one thing.” “No one will like you unless you’re helpful. If you’re invited out for lunch or dinner and don’t help with the dishes, you won’t be invited back.” “Don’t look in mirrors, people will think you’re vain.” Vain! Sarah looked in mirrors to see if she really existed.

17. *How did your father criticize you?*

By silence. Not speaking to me. Withholding my allowance. Smacking me with his ringed hand. Sarah’s stomach churned and her throat tightened as she filled in that blank. She lit a cigarette to avoid dealing with her feelings.

18. *How did your father praise you?*

“You’re pretty as a picture. When the boys see just how pretty you are, I’ll have to tie you to a tree.”

“Pretty? Ha!” Sarah snorted, as she rose from her chair and headed for the bathroom. She stood at the sink and stared at her face in the mirror. “Am I pretty?” she asked her reflection, then, giggling, she asked, “Who’s the fairest one in all the land? Or am I as ugly as the witch in Snow White?”

Sarah unzipped her jeans, lowered her panties, and sat on the toilet feeling discouraged. What difference did it make whether she was pretty or not? In a couple of years, she’d be fifty, old, and wrinkled. No one would look at her then, let alone love her.

Rinsing her hands at the sink, Sarah smiled at her mirrored image. At least her teeth were her own and they were even and bright.

Returning to her desk, muttering, “Damn forms. I hate filling them out.” She continued filling in the blanks.

19. *When your father was upset, how did he show it?*

By raving and ranting. By raging and blaming. That’s how Bob behaved!

20. *What did you do to help when your father was upset?*

I made myself very small and disappeared, or I climbed onto his lap and kissed and hugged him.

21. *What was your father’s advice to you about the world?*

“Protect yourself. If a boy tries to get fresh with you, kick him hard between the legs.”

30. *How do you feel about sex?*

Upset!

Sex with Bob was definitely in, out, and over and the men Sarah had slept with since leaving Bob took longer with their lovemaking, but most of the affairs lasted less than a month. Sarah's long affair with Ralph was still viable. When would *that* end?

35. How were you punished and by whom?

A farmer kicked my blocks across the room. My mother locked me in a steel locker in the basement and wouldn't let me out until I stopped crying. She tortured me with enemas whether I needed them or not.

36. Were the punishments mild or severe?

SEVERE. VERY SEVERE. Once my mother beat me with so much force that the wooden hair brush, she used broke in half.

37. What would you say over and over to a child to make him/her grow up feeling the way you do?

You're bad. You're very bad; you deserve punishment.

Sarah twisted her wrist so vehemently the ball-point pen dropped out of her hand. "Shit," she muttered, as she jumped to her feet. She was sick of this. She'd set the alarm and finish in the morning. Her appointment wasn't until 10:30.

At 8:30 A.M. Sarah was back at her desk, determined to finish the damn form before she showered and dressed.

40. What did your father hope you would be?

President.

45. *What feelings, thoughts, or attitudes were you to keep secret?*

I had no right to express feelings or opinions.

48. *What did you believe about life as a teen-ager?*

I was a member of an elite clique; popularity meant belonging and security.

49. *What do you believe and say about life now?*

Life is scary. I'm afraid I'll end up on a park bench with a newspaper over my face.

50. *What happens to you over and over?*

Illness.

51. *What was the worst thing anyone ever said to you when you were small?*

"You damn brat, get your God damn blocks out of my way."

52. *Who said it?*

A farmer.

53. *How did you feel?*

Scared out of my wits.

54. *What were they feeling when they said it?*

Powerful.

55. *What did you say inside your head at the time?*

I'm bad. I'm a very bad girl.

56. *What do you dislike about yourself?*

Everything.

57. *What do you want to change?*

Everything.

58. *What part of your body feels least alive?*

From my hips down.

60. *When you are upset, describe your feelings.*

Overwhelmed, worthless, filled with despair.

66. *How far back do you remember such feelings?*

I don't remember not feeling them.

67. *What do you do when you're angry?*

Sarah, unaware she smashed her right fist into the open palm of her left hand, concluded that she never felt anger, so how could she know what she did with it.

69. *If nothing changes in your life, what will you be doing in five years?*

I'll be dead or I'll still be in therapy!

At 10:15 A.M., Sarah waited impatiently in Dr. Baskin's reception area. Sarah, perpetually early for *any* appointment, was terrified of being late; even by a few minutes. If Carla kept *her* waiting past the scheduled appointment, she moped. *Everyone* kept her waiting; why should *she* always be on time? After Sarah's second month in therapy, she knew why she feared being tardy. But knowing the reason for her neurotic behavior and changing her conduct was distinctly different.

Early on, Carla had said, “There are three reasons for seeking therapy: (1) to *see* differently, (2) to *feel* differently, and (3) to *act* differently.” Initially, Sarah didn’t understand what the hell Carla was talking about, but as time passed, she became more aware of her self-destructive behavior—but after the fact. How to change her conduct remained a mystery.

After three months of therapy, Sarah still behaved like a juggler tossing five balls in the air. The only ball she didn’t drop was her weekly session with Carla. Ralph still kept her up in the air. In April he showed up at her apartment, mid-week, as promised and wrestled Sarah’s art work to her new Beverly Hills gallery. He bummed a dollar for cigarettes and told Sarah he would stay overnight. At bedtime he announced, “I’m too worn out from lugging your constructions to make love.” The only excuse Ralph hadn’t used to avoid love-making was, “I can’t. I’ve got my period.”

In May, Sarah finally admitted to Ralph that she was in therapy, fully expecting him to put her down. Certain that Ralph, who was *strong* and handled his own problems, would ridicule and deride her *weak* character. Instead, she was amazed and delighted when he said, “If I could afford to see a shrink, I would.”

Bob, the educated, sophisticated lawyer, had told Sarah repeatedly that her head was screwed on backwards. But Ralph, bless him, understood.

By mid-June, Sarah was using therapeutic lingo like a pro: “I want to share this with you.” “I’m out of touch with my feelings.” “I need feedback.” By the end of June, Sarah could “get in touch” with a variety of feelings. She announced, at the start of her therapy session, “I’m in touch with my feelings, all right. I feel like I’m going to implode. I’ve been victimized for my entire life, and I’m outraged and filled with resentment. It feels like great surging waves of anger and hostility. So now I know what anger feels like. Big deal! I still don’t know how to handle it. I’m afraid I’ll explode and blast *anyone* who mouths off to me. What if I behave inappropriately and bash someone who doesn’t deserve that kind of treatment?”

“Shit! I don’t deserve the way I’ve been treated. My mother, Bob, and Ralph abuse me emotionally. I’ve tried, God how I’ve tried, to understand those petty despots. I stay out of their way to avoid their wrath. I please and please and I still get put down. I thought that when I understood my behavior, it would change. It hasn’t. I’m still pleasing, looking for approval, trying to fix other people’s problems, and I’m sick of it all, *especially* myself. *I’m so God damn angry!*” Sarah’s hands fisted and her wrists waved back and forth in frustration.

Carla picked up a strange-looking contraption from a far corner of the room; the “thing” looked like a stuffed, canvas-covered red hand grenade, without safety or pull rings. She pointed the wooden handle toward Sarah and said, “Here, take this bataka and pound a pillow with it and release some of your pent-up anger.”

“Huh?”

The therapist dragged a leather-covered pillow to the center of the room and demonstrated as she said, “Grab the handle and hold the bataka over your head and pretend this pillow is Bob, your mother, or anyone else you can think of who’s put you down. Beat your rage, frustration, and resentment into the pillow.”

“That’s ridiculous. I can’t do THAT!”

“It’s not ridiculous. You’ve reached the boiling point. You’re not yet able to express your feelings to others appropriately, but keeping your anger locked inside makes you sick — literally. Using a bataka in this way gives physical expression to your outrage without hurting yourself or anyone else.”

Carla aimed the “thing” toward Sarah’s hand and said, “Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. Batter the pillow for a change, instead of yourself.” Her words drew a chuckle from Sarah, who reluctantly curved her hand around the wooden handle and the red “weapon” dragged on the carpet.

“Raise the bataka over your head—use both hands if you want to—and beat the pillow, scream at it. Rage. That pillow represents the people you’d really like to rail against.”

Hesitantly, Sarah raised the bataka over her head with both hands and it swayed back and forth helplessly until, still holding it, she threw herself face down on the pillow and sobbed her heartbreak into the alien, unloving material.

“That’s okay,” Carla consoled. “You can have more than one feeling at a time. You can feel angry, sad, frustrated, and disconsolate all at the same time.”

Sarah stopped blubbering and sat up, an incredulous look on her face as she cried out, “My God, Carla, all these feelings are so new. I hardly recognize them individually, let alone collectively.”

“Don’t expect so much of yourself. You’ve repressed your feelings for a very long time. It takes time to incorporate new behavior. One day at a time — that’s a good AA motto — you’ll beat the shit out of that pillow or lie on that mattress and have the tantrum you’ve saved up for your entire life.”

During Sarah’s next therapy session, she “shared” more of her true feelings. “Remember I told you about my roommate at last year’s Santa Barbara Writer’s Conference? Well, Steffie called me last week about our sharing a room again this year. She was really disappointed when I told her I’d canceled my reservation. She didn’t understand when I told her I wanted to and wanted not to. All my feelings, now that I recognize some of them, are conflicted.”

“You do know it’s okay to change your mind.”

“Changing my mind is definitely new behavior. In the past, if I said I was going to do something, no matter what interfered, I stuck to my word. Not this time. I realized that I’m not fit company for myself, let alone anyone else. I flip-flop from moments of feeling great to weeks of feeling hopeless. I’m too filled with rage to even discuss poetry or prose.” Sarah sighed, blew her nose, and said wearily, “I’ve been in therapy for over six months and I feel as if it’s one step forward and three steps back.”

“You’re taking three steps forward, not three steps back. Give yourself some credit.”

“Credit for what? For being a damned fool, looking for others’ approval rather than my own!”

In therapy, Sarah’s long-repressed resentment and rage finally surfaced and she “shared” feelings. “I don’t give a damn anymore whether anyone likes me or not. I refuse to please man, woman, or child. I’m tired of shoving my goals aside to serve others’ needs. I used to laugh and say I managed to do art with my left hand, while I fixed everything for everybody with my right. I’m tired, weary, sick to death of fixing, scraping off the garbage that others dump on me!”

Indignant over the years she’d wasted serving others, Sarah grabbed the bataka, without being asked, and shouted at the top of her lungs, “I count, too!” Canvas smacked leather as Sarah pounded her frustration and righteous anger on the defenseless pillow. Her fury spent, she collapsed on the floor, whimpering, “I have rights, too. I’m not your baby — Bart; I’m not anyone’s baby!”

Exhausted, she lay quietly for several minutes, then sat up, wiped her eyes, and blew her nose before she faced Carla and said quietly, “I’ll grow up if it kills me, and it just might.”

Sarah sat up and waited patiently as Carla rose and walked to her bookcase. She removed a slender volume, turned back to her client with a smile, and handed her the book. “Now that you’ve perfected the use of the bataka,” she chuckled, “I have another positive way for you to use your anger. My friend wrote this poetry right after her divorce when she was very angry. When you finish reading this, please return it to me.”

That evening Sarah took the phone off the hook and covered it with a pillow to silence its squawk for attention. She curled up on two floor pillows, opened the book of poetry at random and read:

Silent screams burst like rockets

Lamentations mourn the gloom.

Fear feasts a banquet of terror

Trepidation a middle name.

Clad in melancholy, hair braided in remorse
Regret swallowed, like a bitter pill
Hope and dream gave birth.
Courage, a full moon rising,
Stars the night and heals the soul.

Awed by what she'd read, her thumb acting as a bookmark, Sarah stretched out on her back and held the book to her heart.

The summer months slipped away in soul-searching therapy, weekends with Ralph, and disillusionment with denial. Week by week, Sarah's awareness grew; then her progress in self-discovery was disrupted by an unwelcome visitor. Elizabeth spent ten days in Sarah's apartment, sleeping in her bed—Sarah slept in her sleeping bag on the living room floor. Ten days of Elizabeth's constant criticism and spiteful behavior and Sarah's headway suffered a major setback. When Elizabeth finally left, Sarah sighed with relief. She spent her next therapy session moaning and groaning about her relationship with her mother.

"When my mother and I are in the same room, I feel and behave like a ten-year-old—sometimes younger. She has me running and jumping for her constantly. Nothing I do pleases her. I . . ."

Sarah's voice trailed off and she fidgeted, waiting for Carla to console her and/or tell her what to do. Instead, Carla remained silent and waited patiently for Sarah to continue.

"Okay, Carla, I get it. You're waiting for me to find my own answers. I can continue my diatribe and harangue my mother's actions until kingdom come, but until I understand my own reactions, I won't change the interaction. Is that right?"

"Every word you said was true and you know it. So, why did you ask for my approval?"

“Force of habit,” Sarah chuckled. Then thoughtfully she said, “I did learn something while my mother was here. I asked her point-blank if my father was an alcoholic. She had no place to hide, and she couldn’t tell me someone was at the door and hang up on me. So, she looked down at her shoes and said in a whisper, ‘He never beat me.’ I assume that meant that, yes, my father was an alcoholic.”

“Are you willing now to accept the fact that both your father and your husband were not just ‘heavy drinkers,’ but alcoholics?”

As Sarah did so often when she couldn’t handle something, she changed the subject. “Ralph doesn’t drink anymore,” she said.

“Did you introduce Ralph to your mother?”

“Are you kidding? Even I know better than to mix oil and water. She finally flew out on Friday, thank God. She could have saved airfare by using her broom.

“Ralph showed up on Saturday and was really sweet and understanding when I moaned about all the aggravation my mother caused. Then Sunday night I curled up on his lap looking for comfort, but when he called me, Baby, instead of feeling comforted, I wanted to punch him out. I don’t understand myself at all. I used to love it when he called me ‘Baby’ the way my father did.”

“You’re outgrowing your father’s brand of nourishment. It was unnatural for your father to continue to call you Baby when you were a grown woman. It was unnatural for you to sit on your father’s lap when you were nineteen years old and pregnant. Your father’s brand of seductive love no longer satisfies—sorry, bad pun—no longer nourishes.”

Sarah’s jaw tightened and through gritted teeth she spat out, “That’s a terrible thing for you to suggest. You just don’t understand. My father loved me. No way was he seductive.” Indignant and outraged at Carla’s suggestion, Sarah stared at her shoes, ankles, and legs.

“Think about it, Sarah.”

For the next six days, Sarah could think of nothing else. For the first three, she refused to even consider that Carla might be right. No way would she accept the possibility that her father's behavior toward her had been seductive. This time she knew Carla was wrong in her observation. Definitely wrong.

By the fourth day, Sarah allowed that there might possibly be some truth to Carla's words, no matter how much she hated to acknowledge it. She searched her memory bank for proof, either way, and remembered.

* * *

Bart twirled his teen-age daughter across the dance floor of the Palmer House's main dining room. He held her hand as he spun her out in a jitterbug and pulled her back to him, whispering, "Happy birthday, Baby. Sweet sixteen and never been kissed. You can sure cut a rug!"

"Accentuate the Positive," eliminate the negative, ended on a high note, and Bart and Sarah stood on the dance floor applauding the orchestra. Then the band struck up, "Sentimental Journey," and while bombs dropped over England and Germany, Bart drew his daughter into his arms. Dancing cheek-to-cheek, he whispered in her ear, "I'm your Sugar Daddy."

"What's a Sugar Daddy?"

"Never mind, Baby," Bart said, as he dipped Sarah backward and then drew her back into his waiting arms. They slow danced past a table edging the dance floor where Elizabeth sat alone. Sarah read her mother's glaring expression as they danced past and she asked, "Daddy, why don't you ever dance with Mom?"

"She doesn't like to dance," Bart responded, dropping his daughter backward again.

Sarah knew her mother loved to dance. She'd Charleston in front of her daughter's highchair between feeding spoonfuls of Tapioca pudding or oatmeal. Sarah remembered her mother, an original flapper, kicking high and waving her arms over her head, and wondered why she knew her mother liked to dance while her father didn't. The

music stopped and Bart and Sarah, hand-in-hand, returned to the table. Sarah, no longer smiling, wondered why she felt guilty.

* * *

During her next therapy session, Sarah “shared” her memories and asked, “Why did my father dance with me and not my mother? At least he could have asked her. My mother’s hateful glare upset me. She had that same expression when I sat on my father’s lap. If he patted my thigh affectionately, she’d have a fit.” Sarah felt nauseated and wondered if Carla could possibly be right. No, no, no. Sarah changed the subject before Carla responded to her inquiry.

The following Tuesday, behind the double doors of Carla’s office, Sarah shuddered as she confided, “Even the thought of what you’ve been suggesting about my father makes me nauseated. But why? Why would I be so upset because my mother gave me a hateful look while I danced with my father?”

“When your mother’s expression displayed her displeasure, you felt guilty, right?”

“Yes, and I still feel guilty. Why, I don’t know. We were only dancing, having fun.”

“Consider this possibility. Your father set you and your mother up as rivals. As rivals, you and your mother both showered him with attention. You both were in competition for his love and approval. That worked fine for him, but it put a wedge between you and your mother.”

“That’s horrible. But you’re right. My mother and I were always competing for my father’s attention. She’s still competing with me. No matter what I’ve accomplished to try to win her approval, she’s dismissed it with a wave of her hand. Shit!”

“What did you just remember?”

“My high school dating pattern. If another girl wanted to date my boyfriend, I’d back away and leave the field open for her. I didn’t fight for my boyfriend or give my friend any competition any more than I fought to keep Bob after he cheated. Now I know

why.” Sarah choked on her words and didn’t speak again until Carla questioned, “What are you feeling right now?”

“Sick to my stomach. Revulsion.”

“Do you know why?”

Reluctantly Sarah said, “Yes,” in a barely audible voice and looked at her shoes and ankles.

“Why, Sarah?”

“If . . . if I’d won the rivalry with my mother . . . if I’d won, that would have meant my father and I . . . oh, God! Even the thought’s incestuous. Oh, God, I can’t bear it. I despise that woman Bob married and yet I let her have him without a fight.”

“You let her?”

Sarah thought for a moment and then hesitantly nodded her head up and down. Finally acknowledging she said, “Yes, I thought I owned him. He thought he owned me, too. He was always ‘letting me.’ No one can ‘let’ another adult.”

“Bob used you just as your father did. He set up women — especially his mother and sisters — as rivals so all of you catered to his needs. As he aged, he needed younger and younger women to try to regain his youth, just as your father used you to regain his.

“As a teen-ager, your father found you attractive and more physically appealing than your aging mother. So, he flirted . . . I can see by your expression that the word offended you, but flirting was your father’s behavior toward you, and it was seductive, whether he acted on it or not. You’ve told me you can’t even remember his presence during your pre-pubescent years. You were of no interest to him then.”

Sarah squirmed on her pillow, sighed, and said, “You’re right about rivals. Bob used his parents and sisters against me. Whatever time or energy they wanted, their demands were always met before my needs. So, you’re right about that. But, I just can’t handle that seductive stuff.”

Sarah’s eyes looked haunted as she stared down at her feet. Her eyes clouded with pain as she looked up and ranted, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! I’m still looking for my

father's kind of love! Shit, and a fart's a fraction," she shouted, "as good old Dad used to say. Damn him! I don't know any other kind of love, so I keep choosing chauvinistic men."

Carla gave a thumbs-up sign of approval and said, "Right on. Right on!"

Confused, Sarah asked, "What have I done that's so great?"

"You've finally stopped sanctifying your father. You're beginning to acknowledge that he wasn't the hero you created after his death. It's hard to be angry at someone who's dead, and especially difficult for you because of the way your father died. But, he was human and had good and bad qualities. It's okay, even good, to recognize that; you can love him and still be angry at his selfish behavior.

"Your father talked to you as if you were a woman, when he wasn't talking to you as if you were his son. He confused your sexual identity. I may be wrong, but I have a feeling you only feel feminine when you're sexual.

"You're used to men who give you attention and pamper you when they're interested in sex, and ignore you the rest of the time. Women often choose men they subconsciously recognize. Someone who will help them play out, or rewrite their life script. A child needs and deserves unconditional love. Your parents only showed love and approval if you pleased them and met their needs. So, you pleased your father, your mother, your husband, and now your lovers, because that was the only way you could experience love—a bogus kind of love at that. Your pleasing behavior served you as a child; you survived. Now you want and need real love, not an imitation. When you learn to love and accept yourself, you'll know how to be truly loved."

After ten months of therapy, Sarah's behavior gradually changed. She no longer called Glo or Jack to ask for advice and approval. What should I do? was no longer a relevant question. Occasionally, she'd fall back into the "should" trap and call her mother. Then she'd reel back from one of Elizabeth's snide jabs and swear she'd never call her again. "The 'shoulds' are tyrannical," Carla had cautioned. "Your solutions to

problems may or may not be approved by others, but if your decisions feel right to you, trust your gut feeling. It's your opinion of yourself that counts."

No matter how many times Carla reassured Sarah, "You're definitely making progress," Sarah doubted herself. She discounted her small successes and focused on her lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. Would she have enough time and money to continue therapy until she felt well and "whole?"

On weeknights she'd be in her pajamas and in bed by 8:00 P.M., trying to concentrate on one of the many books piled high on the floor. Tonight, the book lay open and unread across her thighs as she replayed last night's love-making. Something was lacking, and she'd felt frustrated and dissatisfied when Ralph rolled over and went to sleep immediately, without so much as a goodnight kiss. Sarah had felt more fucked than loved, as she lay awake half the night feeling tearful, empty and unlovable.

With an ache in her heart, Sarah pulled at her book and lost her place in the process. "The hell with it!" she moaned, and slammed the book closed. She'd read and reread, *How To Be Your Own Best Friend*, and even with therapy, she was not her own best friend. She felt hopeless and miserable.

Opening another book at random, she read: "They pressed so close, they passed through each other, and then back to back were stranger's once more."

Closing the book over her thumb to hold her place, she leaned back into the pillows. That was it! She and Ralph were still strangers after all the time they'd spent together. Intimate strangers — Sarah knew he loved her. No matter how many times he swore he'd split for good, Ralph always returned.

But, did Sarah want him back? She was sick of walking on eggs. When Ralph was around, she was on edge, never comfortable with his presence. Irritable and uptight, it was becoming more difficult to cover her peevishness. She felt like screaming, "Fuck off!" when he made demands. She was tired of pleasing him, meeting his needs, while she ignored her own. She was sick of making up in bed. That's how she and Bob had resolved their disagreements. It didn't work then, and it wasn't working now. Carla was

right, Sarah only felt like a desirable woman when she was sexually active; but she was a woman—well, becoming one—with or without sex. A man's lust did not equate with love.

If Ralph was female rather than male, would Sarah want her friendship? Probably not; she'd be as demanding and controlling as Elizabeth.

With renewed energy, Sarah removed her thumb from the book and flipped it to the foot of the bed, vowing, "I will *not* sleep with Ralph ever again!"

The next weekend, however, Sarah slept with Ralph on Saturday and twice on Sunday. Monday morning as he sat in a chair across from the bed and tied his shoelace, concentrating on the knot, he said, "Sarah, I want to talk to you."

"I want to talk to you, too."

Ralph tied his other shoelace then looked up and said, "Me first."

You first, as usual, Sarah thought, but aloud she said, "Okay, go ahead."

"We've both mellowed, haven't we?"

"Yes, therapy's helped."

"Helped you. Maybe. Black folks can't afford therapy, that's for the white middle class. Blacks just have to work out their own problems—mostly with booze and drugs."

Ralph had encouraged Sarah, saying he'd go to a therapist if he had the money. Why was he taking the hard line now?

"Have you worked out your problems, Ralph?"

"Some. You know I don't booze or drug, but remember when we were in Las Vegas and I lost all my money? Well, I figured out that I'm a compulsive gambler, so I'm not going back to Las Vegas again. I refuse to jeopardize my chance to work my way out of the ghetto. I'm gonna use my money the right way from now on."

"I'm glad to hear that, Ralph. I know you'll make it. Despite the gambling, we did have fun in Las Vegas," Sarah said, sadness creeping into her voice. She knew, as Ralph did, that their parting was inevitable.

Ralph broke the silence, “I’ll be thirty next month,” he said, looking into Sarah’s eyes. “I have to concentrate on my studies. I’ll . . .”

“Wait. Stop. Don’t put yourself through this torture; I understand.”

Ralph’s look of relief was a reflection of Sarah’s as their eyes locked and he said, “I appreciate your understanding and not objecting to my decision.”

“It’s my decision, too. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. We have to say good-bye; there’s no future for us and we both know it. It’s okay, Ralph, really it is. I under . . .” Ralph’s lips lovingly pressed against hers completed the word. Then he stood, looked down at her, his expressive eyes filled with ease and love as he said, “I’m leaving now.”

“Wait Ralph, I’ll walk you to the door.” Sarah slipped out of bed, reminding him, “Don’t forget your shirts in my closet, and your fat comb and toothbrush, and . . .”

At the door, Ralph crushed her in his arms and kissed her passionately, just as Bob had when they’d said their final good-bye. Now Ralph stood in the open doorway, reluctant to leave, and said, “Let’s stay friends. I’ll call you one of these days.” Then he turned and walked down the cement steps. Sarah closed the door behind him and leaned back against it, saddened but not sorry about their mutual decision.

For weeks after their breakup, Sarah was amazed when she discovered a small, perfectly formed circle of Ralph’s black hair. They appeared in the strangest places: at the bottom of a dresser drawer, in an ashtray, on the kitchen counter. No matter how meticulously Sarah cleaned and scoured her apartment, Ralph’s circular hairs continued to mysteriously appear. The night she found one at the bottom of the bathtub, she felt sure there was something mystical about the perfect black circles. How many baths had she taken since Ralph last bathed in her tub? How many times had she scrubbed the tub with cleanser? She’d never get Ralph out of *her* hair, until *his* stopped appearing.

Sarah continued therapy through the lonely Christmas holidays and after. No matter how lonely she felt, she did not call Ralph. He called her periodically and no

longer reversed the charges. Each time he called, she'd feel mildly depressed after she hung up, and at her next therapy session she'd complain to Carla.

"Ralph keeps calling me. I've told him over and over again I don't want to be friends. I learned my lesson with Jack. It's just too damn painful to be friends with a former lover. But damn it, I still miss him."

"Ambivalent feelings are a fact of life. It's what you do about them that counts. Has it ever occurred to you that you chose Ralph because he wasn't a threat to you emotionally? You knew you would never marry a black man eighteen years your junior. If Ralph had been your age, you might have considered marriage, and the thought of marriage still terrifies you, doesn't it?"

"You bet your life! Single is hell, but marriage was worse. I don't want to marry anyone, and especially not Ralph. He's a chauvinist like Bob, my father, and all the rest of those bastards running wild."

"You're finally acknowledging your anger at men. If you don't like men, why do you think you need them in your life?"

"You always ask me questions that tear me apart. If I knew the answer to that, I wouldn't be sitting in here week after week, torturing myself looking for answers. Give me a break. I haven't asked you to tell me what I think or feel for a long time. But right now, I need help."

"That's a reasonable request. I may be way off base, but see if this makes sense to you. You are the one who left Bob, yet your divorce left you feeling rejected and abandoned. Your divorce awakened unresolved feelings you had about men, and compounded your distrust and fear. During your first years as a divorced woman you acted out sexually and accepted sex as a substitute for love. That's not unusual for a newly divorced woman. In fact, some women continue to remain emotionally loyal to their ex-husbands while they sleep with new lovers.

"You've equated love with a pounding heart, wet palms, and the excitement you feel when you're 'in love.' That feeling may be love, but more often it's infatuation.

“Love means accepting the others strength and weakness, loving the other unconditionally. In a healthy relationship, intimacy comes before the bedroom, not after. Goethe said, ‘when you trust yourself, you’ll know how to trust love.’ When you love yourself unconditionally, you won’t need to look for lovers who are mother substitutes. Sex will no longer be an obsession—by the way, passion is a synonym for obsession.

“Would you consider the possibility that you compulsively act out sexually to avoid acknowledging truths you would rather deny; using sex as your drug of choice?”

“Give me a break!” Sarah growled and jumped to her feet. Not caring that she wasn’t using all her therapy time. Sarah stormed out of the office without waiting for the hug she usually gave and received from Carla.

CHAPTER 39

“Damn it, Carla! What’s the matter with me? I weep and press on on a regular basis, but I still feel like hell. I’ve been waiting in your reception room for close to an hour—I’m a half-hour early and you’re a half-hour late—the story of my life. I know why I’m so God damn punctual: Remember I told you”

* * *

The door knob turned easily as ten-year-old Sarah opened the back door and stepped into the shadowed kitchen. In dusk’s half-light, the unlit kitchen felt cold and uninviting. No mother stood over the stove stirring stuffed cabbage, simmering in it’s own juice.

Sarah walked through the kitchen and into the gloom of the dining room; her shoulders hunched in fear as she saw a shadowed figure sitting near the wall. Bart’s posture followed the outline of the dining room chair, stiff and unyielding. His long simian arms hung limp on his knees, his lips pressed tight in a grimace.

“Daddy? Is that you?”

Startled, Bart’s hand jerked from his knee and in a joyless voice he asked, “Where’s your mother?”

“I don’t know, Daddy. Isn’t she here? It’s almost dinner time.”

Daddy didn’t look like Daddy. Bart was subdued and laconic as he asked, “Where have you been?”

“Playing ping-pong.”

Bart bent his arm close to his face and examined his watch intently, then blasted Sarah with uncalled for anger: “*You’re late for dinner! You know we eat dinner at six o’clock sharp!*” Sarah checked the Mickey Mouse watch on her wrist and replied, “But

Daddy, it's only two minutes after six . . . and the game . . ." Her voice trailed off as Bart's voice grew louder. *"Don't talk back to me! You're late. Period."*

Sarah's wariness of Bart's ever-changing moods had been dulled by defeat. She'd just lost Lincoln Park's ping-pong championship by two points. Now, alert with apprehension, she watched Bart's posture change dramatically as he bounced off his chair and waved his arms in frantic circles. The blood vessels in his neck expanded as he barked, *"Sarah, you are never to be late again! Ever! Do you understand me? Never!"*

"But, Daddy," Sarah said, still unaware of real danger.

"Don't 'but Daddy' me!"

Frightened by her father's strange behavior, Sarah moved cautiously to the far side of the dining room table. In one pounce, Bart was next to her and she ran from him, circling the table. Bart chased her around the table a second time, caught her, and held her pinned to him; father and daughter both panting, breathless from the chase. When Bart caught his breath, he dragged Sarah back to his chair and pinioned her across his lap, raging and out of control. Frustrated at arriving home to an empty house, his fury exploded in the hand that smacked Sarah's bottom.

Sarah lay passively across her father's lap and endured the beating. "Crack," bare hand against bare thighs. "Crack," against bare arms. "Smack, smack, smack," against her clothed bottom. Afraid to resist and further enrage her father, she lay quietly, not crying out in pain, but she snuffed repeatedly and swallowed hard. Tears wet her cheeks, her ankles twisted back and forth, her hands were balled in fists but her torso remained inert.

Bart's open hand hammered his daughter's submissive body until his palm smarted. His fury cooled by her lack of resistance, he gently turned her over on his lap and cuddled her, kissing away her tears. "I can't spank you," he murmured, "when you won't fight back."

Sarah, curled in her father's arms, felt sick and loved simultaneously.

* * *

Sarah sat quietly, her hands in her lap as she finished detailing the thrashing episode. Her eyes were glazed over, her voice dull and unresponsive as she said, “Knowing why hasn’t changed my behavior one iota.”

Carla’s eyes were filled with compassion as she asked, “What are you feeling?”

“Nothing. Just numb.”

“Doesn’t the injustice of that experience rankle?”

“It does. It wasn’t fair. Even at ten I knew that. Being beaten for being two minutes late—that’s unreal,” Sarah responded, her voice flat.

“Doesn’t that anger you?”

“Intellectually, yes. But emotionally, it’s just another ‘so what.’ After all, that’s the only time my father ever beat me. I didn’t deserve it—only two minutes late, for God’s sake.”

“The two minutes have nothing to do with what happened. Your father, out of his own frustration, would have lambasted you if you’d been on time, or one minute late. Whatever. We don’t know how long he’d been sitting in the dark waiting for your mother. Perhaps they’d had an argument and he was afraid she’d left him again. We don’t need to know the reasons for his behavior. The point is that his frustration and anger do not excuse his abuse of you.

“I can see by your expression that you doubt my use of the word, but it was abuse. You were an abused child. All the birthday cakes and presents in the world can’t compensate for the physical and emotional abuse you received from both your parents. They beat you, not because of your behavior, but to relieve their own anxiety. Do you realize that traumatic episode had sexual overtones?”

Sarah’s mouth became a slit as she sucked in her lips and remained silent.

“The reality is, the abuse had sexual overtones — the panting chase around the dining room table, your passive submission to your father’s beating. You learned then to accept the kick before the kiss. That may be why you accept a lover’s cruelty, so you can have the kiss that follows.”

Sarah bit her lower lip and twisted her hands in her lap, unwilling or unable to respond. “Our time is almost up, Sarah. I know this has been a hard session for you. Be gentle with yourself. Therapy takes time. Give yourself a break and have some fun in Chicago. I’ll see you again in two weeks, right?”

“Yes,” Sarah responded through gritted teeth, unwilling to say “thank you” as she usually did. She stormed out of the office and left the building. She was outraged at her therapist, not at her father. Carla’s suggestion that Bart’s abuse had been sexual as well as physical so offended her that she refused to consider the possibility.

In a huff Sarah tramped to her car, filled with indignation and suffering from emotional indigestion. She muttered, “Carla’s gone too far this time. I’m not going back. I’m through. Finished with therapy. I can’t stand this shit anymore. She’s wrong. Absolutely wrong. My father loved me. So he made ‘one mistake.’” At least Bart beat her only once. Elizabeth beat on her all the time. She didn’t deserve those beatings either.

Rather than return home for lunch before work as she usually did, Sarah decided not to eat. Instead she distracted herself with errands. She stopped at the bank and the grocery store, and kept herself too busy to brood.

After four hours of drudgery stacking note pads into packages of eight — her “boss” was now into selling stationary supplies, all the lamps had been sold — she was further unnerved by Horace’s stuttered revelations. She thought she’d already heard all his stories — his sister’s murder, his time in prison — but there seemed to be no end to his tales of neglect and abuse.

In no mood to cook or eat alone in front of the TV, Sarah decided to eat dinner at the deli. Sarah was surprised at her lack of appetite, even after skipping lunch, but she nibbled on a corned beef sandwich, convinced that she “should eat.”

By the time Sarah dragged into her apartment at 6:00 P.M., she was tired and depressed. She took a quick shower and was still undressed when the phone rang. She

wrapped a towel around her as she dashed into the living room and picked up the receiver in mid-ring.

“Hey, Baby! What’s happening?” Ralph greeted, his voice as natural as if he’d called yesterday and not over a month ago to wish her a Merry Christmas.

“Ralph?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Would you be in the mood to take a ride?”

“When? Where? I’ve had a rough day and I’m really tired.”

“Well, you see . . . well, I tripped on a pothole on the way to school and something’s wrong with my ankle. Wanta’ take a look?”

“I’ll be right there. I’ll drive you to the doctor.”

“No doctor. I don’t have money for any doctor. But, come on over, willya?”

“Sure, but I have to get dressed. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Wait, write down the directions to my apartment. And, Sarah, when you get here, make a U-turn and park in front of the building so we can keep an eye on your car.”

Sarah pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt, jerked her lipstick from the bathroom shelf and smeared it quickly across her lips, ran a comb through her hair, grabbed her jacket and purse, and was on the Harbor Freeway within minutes.

The twenty-five-mile drive to Wilmington seemed endless and she filled the time with reminiscence. How long had it been since she’d seen Ralph? Two months? Or, was it three? Even his put-downs were better than nothing. She hated to admit it, but she’d really missed him. She’d missed his wit, his insights, his philosophy of life. She’d missed his presence and his physical appeal.

She remembered how he’d helped her face the reality of her father’s death. How he’d consoled her after her mother’s visit. “You get angry, Sarah, but you never pop a pill. I’ve watched you rant and rave about your mother, but you never look for an easy out.”

Ralph had his own heartache. Black in White America. A hostage to the Vietnam War. The child he’d fathered and left behind with the unwed mother in the

Philippines. He wondered about the son he'd never see again. His current struggle to survive and complete his education.

The Wilmington turnoff caught Sarah's attention and she concentrated on her driving, cutting across three lanes of traffic and avoiding the blue Chevy that swerved in front of her as she jammed on her brakes. She could see the driver's finger as he held it up in front of the rear-view mirror.

Off the freeway she read the street signs and wondered what Ralph's apartment would be like. He'd never asked her to visit before. When she'd asked him, he always had an excuse and she'd stopped pressing him for an invitation.

Too dark now to read the street signs from the car, she parked, jumped out, checked out the sign, climbed back into the car, and wondered why Ralph had advised her to make a U-turn in front of his apartment. She looked forward to seeing him and the way he lived. She hoped he'd have lots of new art work to show. She wondered if he had more studio space than she did.

Nothing in Sarah's experience prepared her for the building Ralph lived in. The low, one-story with the gray tiled roof, didn't look half bad as she made a U-turn and parked in front. The cement steps looked relatively clean as she climbed them, but as she opened the front door, the odors of urine, vomit, and filth accosted her nostrils and she held her breath.

She lingered in the doorway, waiting for her eyes to adjust; actually afraid to venture down the long, dimly lit corridor. She saw the outline of a man as he approached from the dark tunnel and he was almost next to her before she could see his features. His eyes were red and watery. The mottled dirt on his white face distorted his features into a grotesque mask. Dried vomit on the front of his shirt still smelled, and Sarah gagged and averted her eyes from this abomination as she stepped past him into the corridor. He yelled at her back, "Whoya lookin' for, sweetheart?"

She rushed down the gloomy hallway feeling safer there than she had standing next to that disgusting specimen in the doorway. She could feel his eyes on her retreating

back and felt soiled as she moved forward. Midway down the hall, a man dressed in black trousers and a black shirt wiggled from behind a reception desk and walked toward her. She could barely see him, his dark clothing and swarthy complexion melted into the walls as he approached and said, “*Si, señorita*, whatcha’ want?”

Her fear mounting, she asked, “Where is room twelve, please?”

The slender youth pointed his finger down the hall without speaking and Sarah moved forward again, checking the numbers on each door. At number twelve she tapped lightly and felt relieved when she heard Ralph call, “Come in.”

She turned the knob slowly and entered. Her fantasy of living in one room with a bare light bulb materialized with her first glance. The ceiling of gray plaster was cracked and looked as if a flock of birds had hopped across it. The filthy gray drapes, hung on every other hook, swayed in the windless window, moved by the outside traffic.

The noise of trucks, sirens, whistles, shouts, and screams outside the room were in sharp contrast to the relative quiet of the front entrance. She heard the crunch of crushed metal, steel against steel, and her worst fear of being alone on a park bench with a newspaper over her face was not as horrific as this atmosphere. One room, a sink, and a bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling appalled her. Sarah’s facial expression mirrored her aversion and disgust.

Ralph motioned her to the bed where he lay with his foot propped up on two pillows. “Sorry about this mess,” he said. “I haven’t been able to get out of bed to clean it up.”

Sarah looked at his textbooks and note papers scattered on the threadbare carpeting. Brown stains stood out dark against the faded rose floor covering. Books were piled high, too, on Ralph’s dresser. The dresser, held together by string and supported on one side by three bricks, seemed to lurch forward. The mirror above the dresser rattled as cars and trucks outside drove past. The porcelain sink across the room had a jagged black crack line running zigzag down to the center, ending at green/yellow

stains around the drain. The drip, drip, drip of the leaking faucet interplayed with the buzz, buzz, buzz of flies circling over an open Coke on the shelf next to the sink.

“Sarah . . .” Ralph called to her again and she looked at his face for the first time since entering the room. Warmed by his radiant smile, she grinned back at him and walked to the foot of the bed. Her pleasure at seeing him again turned quickly to concern as she looked at his ankle and blurted out, “My God! Your ankle’s as big as a watermelon.”

“Don’t use that word,” Ralph laughed. “Ya knows I hates watermelon. Mostus black folks does. Stop staring at my ankle and come up here and plant a big fat kiss on my lips.”

Ralph’s feeble attempt at humor didn’t register as Sarah moved to the side of the bed and kissed Ralph quickly on the cheek and picked up a torn towel he held in his hand. She walked to the sink to dampen it and cringed as a black, hairy spider snaked up and out of the drain. She smashed the offender with the balled towel with more vehemence than necessary, shook the intruder from the cloth, turned on the water and watched the dead spider slide back down the drain. Her nose wrinkling in distaste, she wet the rag—that’s what the towel was, a rag, the kind she’d use for house cleaning—and wrung it out.

Returning two steps to the foot of the bed, she wrapped the damp cloth across Ralph’s swollen ankle and stood looking down at him, asking, “What happened? How did you do this?”

“Stop fussing with my ankle and sit down and I’ll tell you,” Ralph commanded. He pointed to a chair piled high with clean laundry and urged, “Take that stuff off, just dump the clothes on the floor.”

The overstuffed chair was barely visible under the quantity of clean shirts and underwear. Sarah removed and folded laundry until she saw padding ooze out from the torn arm rest and the side of the sickening chartreuse upholstery. She shoved back the

remaining clothing and sat on the very edge of the chair. “Have you had anything to eat?” she asked.

“No. Say, see that paper bag on the dresser? There’s a Baby Ruth inside. Get it for me, willya?”

Sarah crossed the room in three steps, opened the bag, and let out a yelp as a roach darted past her hand. She jumped back while the cockroach sped across the dresser top and disappeared behind it.

“For Christ sake, Sarah, I thought you were over that cockroach nonsense. Black people keep roaches for pets. Stop your lady-of-the-manor meowing and get the Raid from that shelf above the sink.”

Sarah followed orders and handed Ralph the spray can, then folded her arms defiantly across her breast and tried to conceal her shudder. She felt claustrophobic and contaminated, as if the room and its contents had rubbed off on her. She wondered how Ralph could live like this; Ralph, a man who relished cleanliness and ship-shape order. She, who had thought of herself as poor since she’d arrived in California, now realized that by these standards, she was rich.

Ralph emptied the Raid can, spraying the entire room from his position on the bed. The familiar odor was repugnant and Sarah held her hankie over her nose and coughed repeatedly. The minute Ralph dropped the empty can to the floor, she announced in an authoritative tone, “We’re getting out of here. Your ankle looks terrible. Pull yourself together, I’m driving you to an emergency room. Tell me what to put in your school bag. Where is it? I’m taking you back to my apartment after you see a doctor and you’ll stay there until the swelling goes down.”

“I have no money for a doctor,” Ralph said flatly. “My school insurance will pay for x-rays and such, but not for doctors.”

“I’ll pay the doctor bill. Now, stop arguing with me and tell me where to find your school bag.”

Sarah located the bag slumped against the side of the dresser and stuffed in folded shirts and underwear she'd laid at the foot of the bed. She piled in the textbooks Ralph wanted, closed the satchel, and parked it next to the door, ready for departure.

Then she helped Ralph pull his trouser leg over his swollen ankle and gently slipped a stocking over his toes and the stocking rolled beneath the swelling. He shoved his other foot into a sock and tennis shoe and she tied the laces before he put his shoed foot on the floor. Once up, he hopped to the door that Sarah held open. In the hall, he leaned against the wall while she closed and locked the door. She wondered why he insisted she lock it, what the hell was there inside to steal?

Ralph also insisted she hang the straps of his school bag around his neck so she wouldn't have to carry it. With one hand he braced himself against the wall and hopped, bracing and hopping until he reached the front entrance. Outside the door, they looked at the steep cement steps and each other. "I hate to ask you, Sarah, but you'll need to support me while I hop down the steps," he said. He put his arm across her shoulders and his full weight almost doubled her. She winced in pain but managed to support Ralph's weight until they reached her car.

They drove in silence for several minutes, then Ralph broke in: "I know you're wondering about the way I live, that's why I never invited you to come over. I had a really nice one-bedroom apartment before we went to Las Vegas, but after I lost my money, I couldn't pay the rent so I had to sell my furniture — it was nice stuff, too — and move. Now that you know what poor really is, maybe you'll stop bellyaching about it."

Unwilling to respond, Sarah kept her eyes on the road, glad her checkbook was in her purse. She wondered how much this would cost her. They drove without talking until they reached the emergency entrance of Harbor General. "Stay in the car," Sarah advised, "until I get a nurse to bring out a wheelchair. Then I'll park."

Every parking place in the three hundred car lot was filled. Sarah circled up and down the rows a half-dozen times before a pickup truck backed out and she parked in the vacated space.

Sarah had been weary when she'd answered Ralph's call for help. Now, as she dragged her feet and walked at least half a mile to the emergency room entrance, she felt exhausted and prayed that a doctor would attend to Ralph in a short time.

At the desk she asked the nurse where she could find, "The black man in the wheelchair," and the attendant directed her to the closed doors of the waiting room. Sarah opened the door and was horrified when she viewed the backs of at least a hundred patients seated in the auditorium. She walked up and down a side aisle until she located Ralph and slumped into the empty folding chair beside him, not wanting to get up again. Ever.

"Say, Sarah," Ralph greeted her, "we're gonna have a long wait. Willya bring my English textbook from my school bag so I can get some studying done and not waste time?"

Sarah didn't look at him or respond, but sighed and rose back up on her feet. Fifteen minutes later she handed him his textbook and he buried his nose in it for the next hour while she sat silently beside him appraising the misbegotten ragtag assortment of patients who filled every available seat. Suddenly aware that she was one of the few Caucasians in the room, she thought she finally understood how uncomfortable Ralph and Jack must feel when they were surrounded by whites.

She and Bob had been in the minority when they'd vacationed in Jamaica, but Jamaica was a black country and she'd expected that. Jamaica was a strange country; one that allowed its black citizens to serve white people in the fancy dining rooms, but denied its citizens the right to dine there. With disgust, Sarah realized that the same held true in America.

Her inner thighs felt chafed and Sarah surreptitiously tugged at her tight jeans to loosen them. As she glanced down at her wrinkled blouse, she realized that she,

undoubtedly, looked as ragtag with her disheveled apparel and makeup-less face as anyone in the room. In Chicago, Sarah had worn designer clothes — Bill Blass, Christian Dior—and she'd left her ranch mink with her mother for safe keeping. What was she doing here wasting her time, dressed like a member of this motley crew?

At 10:00 P.M. a nurse called Ralph's number — each patient had been given a number, as if they were waiting in a meat market. Sarah wasn't a "blood relative," so she was forbidden to accompany Ralph into the examining room. She waited impatiently for another hour while Ralph's ankle was x-rayed.

At half past eleven, he hobbled toward her on crutches, his ankle in a cast as white as the gleaming teeth he flashed. Unable to express his appreciation or thanks, his smile spoke for him. At the exit he looked both ways to see if anyone could observe them, then kissed Sarah on the cheek and said, "I'm sorry you had to wait so long."

Sarah left Ralph leaning against the building while she walked to the car — for a second time — and drove back to pick him up. He leaned on her while she helped him into the car and then laid his crutches across the back seat. She restarted the motor, switched on the radio, and played it loud, trying to stay awake while they drove to her apartment.

They arrived after midnight, and by the time Sarah had slapped together a tuna fish sandwich and poured Ralph's milk, all she could think about was sleep. When he finished eating, she helped him undress and get into bed, then removed his shoe and stocking. She dropped her jeans and blouse on the carpet, too exhausted to even wash her face or brush her teeth.

Sleep was not on Ralph's mind, despite his pain, and he pulled her to him and nibbled on her eyelids, her chin, her neck, her earlobes, her breasts, until she responded. He slipped her panties over her hips and ankles and she kicked them to the foot of the bed. Ralph's gentle kisses had awakened Sarah, and her desire. The months of separation evaporated as Ralph laughed, "Tonight, you'll have to do all the work, Baby," and rolled her willing body on top of his.

Her tongue flicked at Ralph's cleft chin, licked at his closed eyelids, and he moaned in pleasure as she mouthed his smooth, hairless chest. He held his erect penis steady as her warm, wet vagina covered it like a silk glove and they undulated together in sweet harmony. Swaying like a hula dancer, Sarah's sensuous body had a will of its own as it gave and received completion.

In cadence, Ralph and Sarah came together in a triumphant march of desire and passion. Spent and satisfied, they nestled together into sleep, and in the morning she awakened in her lover's arms, feeling needed and loved.

For four days, between grocery shopping, preparing three meals a day, cleaning up the kitchen, and not missing one afternoon of her part-time job, Sarah nursed Ralph back to health. Each night he nursed her breast, and despite his cast, or perhaps because of it, he gentled and pleased Sarah until she glowed with pleasure.

By the fifth day the swelling of Ralph's ankle had receded, and Sarah reminded him that she had to fly to Chicago the following morning. She asked again for assurance that he would be able to drive her to the airport.

"Sure," he said. "The pain's pretty well subsided, and besides, it's my left ankle in the cast, so I'll be able to use my right one for the gas peddle and brake. Why are you going to Chicago, anyway?"

"I thought I told you." She had, but he wasn't listening. "Damned if I know!" she repeated. "I thought I was finished with all that legal hassle after my divorce, but now my Chicago lawyer says I have to return for more unfinished business." Unfinished business, another phrase Sarah had learned in therapy.

On Sunday morning, Ralph put his crutches in the back seat of the Pontiac and managed to climb in the front seat without Sarah's help. She drove to the airport, all smiles, delighted that she could now afford to fly in daylight and not arrive in Chicago exhausted after the cheaper night flight. She had called John and reminded him to stop at his grandmother's and pick up her mink jacket. "Please bring it to the airport with you,

or I'll freeze my ass off. I don't have a winter coat. Don't laugh if I look ridiculous wearing blue jeans with a mink."

Double parking in front of her terminal, Sarah was in a great mood anticipating the pleasure of seeing Johnny and little Carl in Chicago. Unlocking the car trunk, Sarah hoisted her suitcase to the sidewalk, and then walked to the driver's side of the car. Ralph had already slipped over and he sat at the wheel, grinning at her as he rolled down the window. "You really took good care of me, Sarah," he said. "No one has ever given me that kind of TLC before." He stuck his head out of the window for a good-bye kiss, not caring, it seemed, if anyone was looking.

He mumbled "Thanks," and Sarah wasn't sure that's what he'd said as she kissed his cheek again, said "Bye," and turned to leave. He called her back, "Hey, Baby," he said, "don't forget to call me from Chicago and remind me of the flight number and the time I'm supposed to pick you up. And don't let your mother grind you down."

Too excited to doze during the three-and-a-half-hour flight, Sarah rehashed the last week and Ralph's sweet behavior. He was a good man: kind and gentle, loving and uncomplaining. She'd been bitching about poverty since she left Vanderville, and she wasn't poor at all. Ralph was poor. Sarah knew he'd never be able to repay the \$25.00 doctor's bill, but that didn't matter.

Growth had been forced on Sarah during these years alone, and now as she reappraised her lifestyle, she was grateful she had a comfortable apartment, an old but reliable car, money for extras, *and* Ralph was back in her life. She chuckled as she remembered another one of Bart's sayings: "It's not better or worse; it's good and getting better."

CHAPTER 40

Two nights before Sarah's scheduled departure from Chicago she called Ralph, person to person. When she heard the desk clerk respond, "Whatcha want?" she trembled; the inequity of Ralph's living conditions galled her. She listened to Ralph clump down the hall and thought, no one should have to live in that hovel; especially Ralph, who epitomized refinement and good taste. "Hey, Baby. What's happening?" Sarah felt cheered by Ralph's upbeat tone.

"I promised I'd call and remind you of the time and flight. How are you?"

"Good news. I don't need the crutches anymore. I can limp along on the steel brace that's embedded in the cast."

"That's great! So, you haven't missed too many classes. I can't wait to see you. I managed to work in a day at the Art Institute and a couple of art galleries. I have so much to tell you about the new work. The critics like it— but half of it's not as good as yours. Or mine for that matter."

"Great! Say, Baby, it's not easy standing here on one foot, tell me all about it when you get home. Now, what's the time and flight number?"

Sarah's Saturday flight from O'Hare was uneventful. She dozed on and off, anticipating her reunion with Ralph, his coming back to her apartment, and his coming with her.

To her chagrin, Ralph was not waiting for her at the arrival gate, nor was he present while she waited for her luggage to come down the chute. Disgruntled, she wrestled her suitcase from the moving platform, dragged it to the nearest phone and dialed Ralph's number. When she heard his voice, she raved, "What the hell are you

doing there? Why aren't you here? I told you what time I'd be in. Has something happened to my car?"

On Sunday, Sarah called Jack a half dozen times and then gave up. On Monday morning, before eight, she dialed his number again. When he answered in a sleepy voice, she excused herself for her early call. "I couldn't reach you yesterday and I wanted to catch you this morning before you left for work."

In the background she heard a woman whine, "Who the hell is calling you so early?" Sarah speculated about Jack's love life, but refrained from acknowledging the woman's presence. Jack yawned into the phone as Sarah apologized again and added, "It's important, Jack. I really need to talk to you . . . alone."

"What's up? When did you get back?"

"Day before yesterday."

"Was it your mother or Bob who gave you a hard time? Is that why you need to talk to me?"

"Neither. I took your good-ole-advice and behaved like a camera. I observed the craziness but didn't involve myself. Chicago's a million years ago. When can I see you?"

Jack hesitated and Sarah fretted. With a new woman in his life—and she knew it was a new woman, since she hadn't recognized her voice—he would no longer have time for her. Sarah felt relieved when he finally spoke. "I'm working in L.A. all day and have a dinner appointment, so how about meeting me at my apartment tonight around eight?"

Sarah shivered and hugged her bent knees closer to her chest as she sat huddled on the cold cement steps waiting for Jack. She'd arrived early, as usual. She dropped her legs to the tread, dug in her pocket for her lighter, lit another cigarette, and then flipped her lighter on again to check the time. She held her watch close to her face and read 9:10. She jumped to her feet and stamped a few times to warm up, cursing Jack for being over an hour late.

She moved one step higher on the stairway, sat, and leaned back against the riser behind her, still chilled and more disheartened. Men always kept her waiting. She felt like a damn fool and thought she should get her ass in gear and drive home, but still she waited. Sarah remembered the hours Bob had kept her waiting in a Loop restaurant. She'd sat alone for so long that a man had tried to pick her up. When Bob finally arrived—three hours late—Sarah complained bitterly and told him how embarrassing it was to sit alone in a restaurant.

Exasperated and always short-tempered, Bob sneered, "I'm late. So what! Stop your bitching, I was held up in court. I'm the one who earns the living." He might have used the excuse: detained at city hall, the police station, or the train was late. What difference would it have made? Now Sarah knew it wasn't lawyer-business that had kept her biding her time; it was monkey-business; Bob slipping in and out of Lorraine and another motel.

Sarah was trained to wait. When she was nine or ten, Elizabeth "accidentally" locked her out of their apartment. After school, Sarah had waited on the back steps for almost four hours. When Elizabeth finally arrived, she warned Sarah, "Stop your sniveling. You could have waited at a neighbors' and not sat here shivering." Now, with the help of therapy, Sarah understood why she'd been afraid to leave the back steps. Once she'd received a beating because she'd arrived home from school a half-hour late. No telling what Elizabeth would have done if she'd arrived home and hadn't found Sarah waiting.

Sneezing repeatedly, Sarah blew her nose and felt as chilled now as she had then. A plane thundered overhead and captured her attention. Sarah looked skyward and watched twinkling lights flash on and off as the plane descended for landing. She looked at the giant underbelly as the plane lost altitude; the twin motors looked like gigantic tits on an enormous sky-mother. Red and blue lights flickered and flashed and beams of light parted the somber sky.

Would she ever have money to travel? Chicago didn't count, that was business, painful business. Seeing her old stomping grounds was always a blatant reminder of what she'd lost. She looked skyward again as another plane ascended into the night sky, too high to see anything but twinkling tail lights. She wondered where the passengers were headed and whether she'd ever visit all the romantic foreign countries she'd discovered in her coloring books.

The sound of Jack's van, tires wearing on cement, drew Sarah's attention. She stood and wiped the back of her jeans with both hands, smoothing her jacket down over her hips. She stood on the landing, waiting on one foot and then the other, until Jack brushed past her jangling his keys and grunting, "Hello." She followed him inside and he buzzed her on the cheek in greeting, but gave no explanation or excuse for his late arrival. Sarah's expression revealed her annoyance, but Jack seemed oblivious as he yanked off his leather boots, rubbed the soles of his stocking feet, and then wandered into the kitchen.

Sarah's attitude softened when he returned smiling, carrying two glasses of Chablis, and settled down on the couch next to her. "Okay, let's have it. What's going on? You look unnerved," he said.

Sarah patted the leather sofa as if her hand remembered the love-making experienced on its cushions. Her lower lip dragged as she whined, "I just cannot believe what happened. Ralph broke his ankle . . . I went to Chicago . . . he had my car . . . he wasn't waiting at the airport . . ."

"Hey, relax, slow down, we've got all evening. You can even sleep on the sofa tonight if it gets too late for you to drive home."

"No, thanks, but I can't. I have therapy tomorrow. In fact, a double session. I called Dr. Baskin this morning and asked for extra time."

Jack removed Sarah's unsipped wine glass from her hand and placed it on the table. "The way you're trembling, you might spill it and I just had the couch cleaned," he

chuckled. "You look like what you really need is a big hug." He reached for her and she cried on his shoulder.

"I called Ralph from the airport. His words were slurred and belligerent when he announced, 'I don't have enough money for gas, so I can't pick you up.' I was furious and shouted, 'Damn you! Borrow the money, steal the money, but get your ass down to the airport, pronto! I'll be waiting outside.' I hung up before he had a chance to reply.

"My ass was paralyzed from sitting on my suitcase for an hour-and-a-half waiting for him." Sarah shivered, just thinking about how chilled she'd felt.

"Why didn't you wait inside the lobby?"

"I thought he'd double park and I could hop in the car immediately — you know how testy security gets if you double park too long. I didn't want to miss him. When he finally showed up, he was walking, not driving. I stood up and watched him approach, half limping and half swaying. If a brown man's complexion can look ashen, his did. He had a knit stocking cap pulled down over his ears, his clothes were disheveled, and he looked raunchy and disgusting. His appearance frightened me."

"Sounds to me as if he were drinking or high on something."

"Ralph doesn't do drugs, and he hasn't had a drink since we've been back together." Sarah paused. "Drinking? that never occurred to me. It would certainly explain his behavior. He came up to me glowering, no welcome home kiss or anything. He just said, 'Follow me.' I dragged my suitcase, like a good Chinese wife, walking behind him while he hobbled at a fast trot a yard in front of me. Cast or no cast, there was nothing wrong with his arms. We walked for blocks and I finally called out for him to stop so I could catch my breath. When he turned back, I dropped my suitcase, hoping he'd take pity on me. 'Where's the car?' I asked. He looked at me in disgust and said, 'I can't remember!'

"I just lost it. I was exhausted from the trip and the wait; exasperated at his crazy behavior.

"Before I finished my tirade, he shoved the parking ticket and the keys into my hand and sneered, 'Okay, white girl. I'm sick of your bitching. Find your own damn car!' and stalked off.

"That bastard left me alone at midnight, stranded at the airport. I was in shock. I didn't know what the fuck to do. Then I remembered I had 'mad money' squirreled away in my wallet, so I hailed a cab. The driver drove me all over hell searching for my car. When I couldn't find it, he suggested airport security and drove me to their headquarters to report my missing car. It was embarrassing trying to explain why I didn't know where my own car was parked, and even more embarrassing when I didn't know my own license number — you know I have trouble remembering numbers. They had to call some state department to find out my license number. They finally told me I'd better go home and that they'd call me in the morning when they located my car. That cab ride cost me \$25.00, which I can't afford. I didn't get to my apartment until three in the morning!"

"That's incredible!"

"That's not the end of it. When I couldn't reach you on Sunday, I asked my neighbor to drive me back to the airport. I never heard from the security police. We drove 'round and 'round the parking building until I finally spotted my car. And then, to add insult to injury, I had to cough up a bundle for overnight parking!

"No wonder Ralph didn't kiss me 'Hello!' He didn't want me to smell his breath. I can't understand why he'd start drinking again; what really hurts is his sarcastic, 'white girl.' Why did he say that?"

Jack moaned and whistled through his teeth. "The perils of Pauline are nothing compared to your life," he said. Then, responding to Sarah's obvious pain, he said, "No shit. That was a tough call, but you handled it; be proud of yourself. Last year you would have sat in the lobby and sobbed, and then called me. This time you took care of yourself. Have you had enough? Are you finally finished putting up with Ralph's shenanigans?"

"You can bet your sweet ass I am! This time he went too far. I don't ever want to see him again as long as I live."

Jack breathed deeply, thought for a second, and then said, "Okay, you want the truth? I'll give it to you straight. Ralph probably started drinking again because he knew he had to break up with you, and that's hard — especially after you'd taken such good care of him. Where he's coming from, he can't afford to be dependent on anyone. He didn't want to face you, and thought he could avoid the problem by not picking you up. When you insisted, he drove to the airport, knowing he'd have to break it off face-to-face. His behavior was outrageous, no doubt about that. He knew you might have forgiven his airport antics when you cooled down and he sobered up. As a black man myself, I know where he's coming from, believe me. He does love you, but he had to absolutely finish your relationship—so he called you 'white girl.' He knows you; you'd never forgive him for that."

Jack took another deep breath and added, "To tell you the truth," as if he hadn't, "I used to be jealous of Ralph — his dingus is even larger than mine," he chuckled. Then, serious again, he said, "Just kidding. You know that's ridiculous," and winked at Sarah. "Come on, it's not the end of the world. You got over Bob, you'll get over Ralph. In a way, I can't help but admire the way he ended your relationship. He knew there would be no more kissing and making up after that 'white girl' crack."

Sarah looked as if she'd been kicked in the stomach. Yet Jack didn't let up. "I've observed Ralph's treatment of you. The same harsh and demanding way you've described Bob's behavior. You still don't know how to protect yourself. You can't be an emotional cripple all your life. I told you long ago that you don't have to fall in love with everyone you sleep with. A fuck is a fuck is a fuck. Don't open your heart when you spread your legs."

"I know you think I'm harsh and unsympathetic, but you've got to grow up and face reality. You'll get your act together, and when you do, you'll wonder why it took so long."

Sarah hated Jack's cold, clear assessment, but his words rang true and she thanked him as she rose to leave. "As much as it hurts, I know you're right. Thanks for listening," she said. "You're a good friend." Tearfully, she pecked Jack's cheek and hurried out the door.

Driving home, Sarah didn't need radio music for company; Jack's words thrummed in her ears. "Emotional cripple. Emotional cripple." It rubbed her ego raw—what was left of it.

In the morning Sarah arrived at Dr. Baskin's office promptly at 9:00. She sat in the waiting room and remembered that only two weeks earlier she'd sworn she'd never return to this office. So much had happened in that brief time, Sarah couldn't remember why she'd been so upset. But then therapy in general was a painful experience. It takes courage to dig into your past when you're choking on your present. Sarah felt emotionally bruised and stripped of her defenses. She was deep in thought and visibly shaken when Carla stood over her and said, "Hello."

Closing the double doors behind her, Carla said, "You look upset. Was your trip to Chicago a disaster?"

"Chicago's ancient history. Ralph broke his ankle," Sarah groaned, as she plunked down on a pillow. "I slept with him again," she moaned, as she removed her shoes. "Ralph called me 'white girl,' and Jack thinks he's drinking again because he wanted to break up with me."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Hell, I don't know what to think or what I feel. I can't even talk anymore! Where the hell is the bataka?" Without waiting for a reply, Sarah jumped to her feet, marched defiantly across the room and braved the mattress she'd ignored since her first visit to this office. She sat on the edge cautiously, then twisted her hips and flung herself backward, kicked her feet, and screamed, "Damn men, they're all bastards!"

Demoralized spiritually and physically, drained of emotion, Sarah sat up, moved back to the edge of the mattress, and looked at Carla in amazement. "I had a tantrum," she said in a soft voice.

"Hardly a tantrum, but a good beginning. Bravo," Carla said, giving Sarah a thumb's up. "You've carried your anger and rage inside far too long."

Sarah sighed, hoisted herself up from the mattress and walked across the room. She dragged a velvet cushion to the wall, plunked down on it, and said mournfully, "I've been in therapy for over a year-and-a-half. I think I'm making progress, then I revert to old behavior, like sleeping with Ralph when I swore I'd never sleep with him again. Every man I've ever loved drank too much. Why am I attracted to men who drink? I'm a hopeless case. Why do you put up with me? Why haven't you rejected me? Everyone else does."

"You're so hard on yourself. Give yourself a break, Sarah. You *are* making progress. Six months ago, you would have blamed yourself for Ralph leaving you high and dry at the airport. When we are raised in an alcoholic family system, we are attracted to alcoholic partners."

Sarah glanced at a loose thread in the carpet, yanked it out, and asked, "Why did I sleep with Ralph?"

"You cared about him and you wanted to. That's not the issue for the moment. Are you aware that when I broach a subject — like your father's alcoholism, or any topic you don't want to discuss — you either change the subject, crack a joke, or look at me with a blank expression?"

"I'm numb most of the time," Sarah said, sucking in her lips and looking perplexed.

"Going numb is a protective device, and that's okay, but when you protect yourself from pain, you are also eliminating the possibility of feeling joy. You need to feel all your feelings, the good ones and those that are not-so-good."

Sarah fidgeted, felt each of her fingers with her thumb and said, "Two hours is a long time for me to go without a cigarette; this double session is hard. Would you mind if I went to the bathroom and grabbed a quick smoke?"

"This is your time. You can use it any way you want; just tap on the door when you're ready to come back into the office."

Sarah rushed down the hall to the john, peed in record time, lit a cigarette, and stood over the toilet flicking ashes after each puff before tossing the long butt into the water and flushing.

She walked slowly back to Carla's office, tapped on the double doors, plunked down on her cushion, slipped off her shoes, and said with a deep sigh, "Okay, my father was an alcoholic. I've got to accept it. But why does his behavior have anything to do with me now? He's been dead for years."

"Physically dead, yes, but his emotional hold on you is still very much alive. With your background, it's a miracle you didn't become a prostitute at seventeen."

Sarah's mouth gaped open and she stared at Carla in disbelief.

"You look as if I slapped you in the face. I didn't say you *were* a prostitute."

"That's what I feel like, sleeping with men I'm not married to," Sarah replied, with her eyes closed and her chin dragging on her chest.

"The man who treated you like a whore was the man you married."

Sarah felt like her face had been slapped. "What do you mean?" she asked plaintively.

"For the last few months, you've shared with me the many times Bob demanded sex and wouldn't take no for an answer. The times he insisted you rub his balls until he fell asleep. The New Year's Eve he had too much to drink and threw you down on the rug and mounted you as if you were an object. You didn't call that rape, but that's what it was. You look astonished, Sarah. Yes, a man can rape his wife. Bob raped and abused you physically and emotionally. How about the time he had you bend over the toilet so

he could get his jollies before the twins came home from the grocery store — where he'd sent them to get them out of the house?"

Sarah sat in silence, staring at her therapist as if she'd never seen her before. Carla continued: "Your early therapy gave you the strength to finally stand up to Bob, and he was losing his control over you. He moved on to another more compliant woman who would do his bidding without questioning his behavior. Bob is a phony, a fake, a pretender. His life is a sham. He showed you off as his prized possession, dressed you like his private call girl — and in a way you were; you answered to his every call and demand. He demeaned you to keep you in line, and when his emotional abuse no longer provided him with the results he desired, he found a more passive woman. It's not surprising you fell for a controlling, manipulative man. His behavior mirrors your mother's. Abuse is what you were trained for. It never mattered to either one of them how you felt."

"You're right, I know you are. But why? Why did I jump to the tune Bob called? I'm still jumping to my mother's," Sarah said, looking more dejected than ever.

"Lean back against the wall, Sarah, close your eyes and see if you can remember a time you disobeyed your mother. When you're ready, open your eyes and tell me what you remembered, if anything."

Sarah followed instructions, and within seconds tears dripped down her cheeks and she whimpered, "I know, I know."

* * *

A police siren, shrilling like an overheated kettle, whistled in counterpoint to splashing waves beating the shore of Venice Beach. Elizabeth's screams soured the bright California sun and bright red blood poured from her ripped foot and puddled in the sand.

A uniformed police officer parted the crowd that milled around the screaming woman who'd collapsed. A sobbing child, kneeling beside her whimpered, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

The officer lifted the woman in his arms, and said to the child, "Follow me." Elizabeth's shrill screams were unabated; bright red blood poured from her foot and mottled a path in the sand for Sarah to follow. At the curb, the patrolman sat Elizabeth down, opened the trunk of the police car and removed a first aid kit. He wrapped gauze round and round Elizabeth's foot and then helped her into the back seat. He patted Sarah's head and said reassuringly above Elizabeth's screams, "Don't worry, Honey, your Mommy will be all right." Then he took the child's hand and led her to the other side of the car and helped her into the back seat next to her mother.

The ride, punctuated by Elizabeth's screams and the screaming siren as the police car sped through red lights, was terrifying for a six-year-old who tried to take her mother's hand. Elizabeth jerked her hand away as if she'd touched a burning coal and stopped screaming long enough to shout, "Don't touch me! This is all your fault!"

In the doctor's office, the officer laid Elizabeth on the examining table and closed the door behind him as he left the room. He sat next to the frightened child in the anteroom, and held her hand while her mother's screams poured over her like boiling water. Biting her lips, her eyes dry, Sarah sat numb and silent; the warmth of the policeman's hand could not comfort her.

The officer took her hand in both of his and reassured her over and over, "Don't worry, Honey, your Mommy will be all right."

"It's my fault. It's my fault," Sarah whimpered pitifully, as the caring man tried to convince her that she had not caused this accident.

"Don't blame yourself, Honey. Some drunk threw a broken bottle off the pier and your mother stepped on the sharp glass hidden under the water; that's how your mother cut her foot."

Sarah snuffled, bowed her head in shame, and whimpered, "Itttts myyyy faulllt, Mommy said."

"Why do you think it's your fault, Honey?"

"Mommy said."

Elizabeth's wounded foot was swathed in white gauze and white tape covered eighteen stitches in the sole of her foot. Dried blood dotted the dressing as the police officer carried her to the police car. Sarah, following behind, held her breath as she slipped into the back seat beside her mother, sitting as far away from her as possible.

For the next three months, Elizabeth hobbled with the help of a wooden cane, her wounded foot bound and covered with a cut off tennis shoe. Periodically, she pointed the cane to her bandaged foot and reminded Sarah, "You see what happens when you disobey? If you'd come out of the water when I first called you, this would never have happened. I hope this teaches you a lesson. You *must* always obey. Immediately! Mother knows best."

* * *

Sarah, doubled over, held her stomach and rocked back and forth murmuring, "It's my fault, it's my fault," in the tremulous voice of a child.

Like a "good mother," Carla scooted across the space between them, wrapped her arms around Sarah and comforted her, patting her gently on the back as Sarah sobbed on her breast like a six-year-old.

CHAPTER 41

After two hours of therapy, Sarah drove home feeling wiped out and dispirited, yet relieved that she'd discovered another missing link to her neurotic behavior. Now she understood why she jumped to commands like a soldier in combat; she, too, was at risk.

Back in her apartment, Sarah splashed cold water on her face then laid across her bed, fully dressed, grateful she had time for an hour's rest before she rushed off to work. She closed her eyes and visualized the beach scene. The memory of her mother's terrified screams and her red, red blood dripping across the sand were so vivid, Sarah relived the experience. She felt like the remorseful child who disobeyed. She remembered Elizabeth standing at the water's edge shouting, "Sarah, time to go home! Come out of the water. NOW!"

Sarah waved at her mother to acknowledge she'd heard, but rather than traipse through the water she turned away to catch the next big wave. She could belly-surf to shore and arrive there faster than plodding through the water and tiptoeing across the pebbled shore line.

Elizabeth never asked Sarah for an explanation of her behavior, but retorted: "You were walking into deep water and I was afraid you'd drown; so I came in after you. That's what a 'good mother' does. She protects her child."

Whimpering like a disobedient child, Sarah covered her face with her hands and wept for the "good mother" who'd suffered because of her daughter's behavior. Then she sat up, reached for a tissue, wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and lit a cigarette. She took a drag and another memory surfaced.

Sarah *had* caught the next big wave. She was near her mother when Elizabeth stepped on the shattered glass bottle. Her bloody screams caught the lifeguard's attention

and he sprinted into the water, picked Elizabeth up in his arms, and carried her to the sand where she collapsed. Then he called the police.

The butt smoldered in the ashtray as Sarah forgave herself. She and her mother were both victims of some drunk's carelessness.

Week after week in therapy, Sarah relived repressed traumas of her childhood. She remained open to *most* of Carla's advice and suggestions but remained unwilling to believe or discuss the remote possibility that her father's behavior had sexual overtones. When Carla tried a new approach by asking, "Have you ever been molested?" Sarah looked horrified and clamped her mouth shut.

One Saturday night, Shirley threw a party. Sarah was a stranger to most of Shirly's friends, but she moved among the guests as if she believed in her own power. Men clustered around Sarah, as if her vitality could be shared. She laughed to herself when a young man used flattery to gain her attention. "You're the most independent, together woman I've ever met. You're so alive! I want some of your good energy." The self-proclaimed poet smiled as he waved his arm around the room and said, "There isn't a woman in this room, as young as they are, who could hold a candle to you."

Sarah didn't believe Jimmy's line, but to prove to herself that she still had sex appeal and could sleep with a man without love, regret, or guilt — and Jim was attractive — she allowed him to come home with her and spend the night.

After breakfast, when Jimmy departed, Sarah grinned with satisfaction. She still had what it took — not too bad for a woman older, by a generation, than her handsome Irish lover. Sarah felt like a grown-up willing and able to call her own shots—not equating sex with love. She captured her feeling of triumph in her journal: "A poet loved me for a night. A poet with gentle hands and knowing fingers splashed against my womaness; his breath like ocean waves hugged my ear."

The Tuesday after the party, Sarah bounced into her therapist's office, grinning with her news. "You've counseled me to be kind to myself; not to feel shame or guilt

about my old or new lovers. Well, I took your advice. I enjoyed some hanky-panky and I am NOT waiting by the phone for my young lover to call.”

Carla did not comment or commend Sarah’s behavior, but said, “There’s a strong likelihood that your father’s behavior toward you had sexual overtones. Are you willing to discuss that possibility?”

Sarah tutted in disgust and said, “Not that again! You just don’t understand. My father was a friendly, loving man. He always ‘kibitzed’ with waitresses, his employees, it was just his way.”

“Whatever you say, Sarah. I don’t want to push you, but I think there is an area of your life you’re unwilling to consider. For example, would you consider the possibility that you might have been molested as a child?”

Thoughtful, Sarah bowed her head, then looked up and said, “Okay, I’ve learned to trust you enough to consider the possibility; but I truly don’t understand why you ask me these questions.”

“I may be wrong, but from my years of experience as a therapist, I find your sexuality fits a pattern, and if I’m right, the information could be very helpful to you.”

“Therapy is like a cyst; you squeeze out coiled puss and the next week the damn thing fills up again.”

Carla chuckled, “You have such a way with words, Sarah. Have you ever considered writing comedy?”

“No, but why not? My life is a joke.”

“If you think your life is a joke, wouldn’t you like to discover the punch line?”

“Okay, okay, damn it. I’ll consider the hideous idea.”

After work, Sarah had a light dinner, took a quick shower and, dressed in P.J.s, laid on her back on the living room carpet, her head resting on the bean bag. Thoughtful and determined to brave out the possibility that she may have been molested, she pondered the idea. With nothing to distract her, a memory bubbled up:

* * *

Elizabeth and her six-year-old daughter lived in a trailer park in Long Beach. Sarah's favorite "playground" was the laundry room where every day at least a half-dozen children ran between the three round, wringer-topped washing machines. They giggled and whooped it up with unrestrained zest, while Sarah watched the boisterous activity from the sideline; afraid to join in and dirty her dress. She'd been punished for less. Everyone said *those* children were rowdy; Sarah was well-behaved and mannerly.

One bright, sunny afternoon, a boy picked up a wooden scrub board from the sink and scratched out a tune with a broken tooth comb he found on the floor. All the girls, except Sarah, twirled around as fast as they could and an ironing board collapsed as one of the other boys ran past it.

The sunlight dimmed as a burly stranger blocked the entrance. He wore a battered brown fedora, pulled low over his forehead; his huge hands looked like animal paws as he moved toward Sarah and said, "Come here, pretty little girl." Sarah stood frozen in place as he moved closer. She heard the other children shout, "RUN! RUN!" as they screamed and rushed past the stranger and disappeared into the sunlight.

"I won't hurt you," the man whispered, as he bent over Sarah and picked her up in his arms. At that moment, Elizabeth entered the laundry room. Seeing her daughter in a stranger's arms, she screamed hysterically, "PUT HER DOWN! PUT HER DOWN THIS INSTANT!" Hurling her laundry basket at his legs, she pummeled the man's arm with her fists.

Sarah skinned her elbows on the cold cement when the strange man dropped her and raced away. Before Sarah had a chance to stand, Elizabeth grabbed her arm, yanked her up to her feet, and dragged her back to the trailer by one wrist, not uttering a sound. Once inside, Elizabeth locked the trailer door, ripped off Sarah's dress with rage, pulled off her undershirt and panties, and threw her across the bed. Then she grabbed her wooden hair brush from atop a cabinet, pinned Sarah to the bed with a heavy hand on her back, and beat her bare bottom unmercifully, spewing venom with each wallop,

“YOU’RE BAD! YOU’RE A BAD GIRL! I WARNED YOU NOT TO TALK TO STRANGERS!”

Whack, smack, the wooden paddle stung Sarah’s bottom while her out-of-control mother shouted, “YOU’RE BAD! I WARNED YOU!” With each swat came emotional as well as physical abuse. Crack, Elizabeth battered her daughter in fury while Sarah’s wails rose higher with each blow until her mother threatened, “STOP CRYING! THIS INSTANT! I’M DOING THIS FOR YOUR OWN GOOD! THAT MAN COULD HAVE KILLED YOU!”

Sniffing into the sheet, Sarah gulped for breath, swallowed her tears and stopped crying aloud. Her mother dropped the hairbrush and it banged on the floor as Elizabeth shouted, “NOW STAY IN THAT BED! BAD GIRL! DON’T YOU DARE MOVE UNTIL I GET BACK!”

As Elizabeth moved toward the door, she provoked more guilt, “I’m going back to the laundry room to pick up the dirty clothes. I threw that basket to save your life!”

Devastated, Sarah buried her face in the sheet. Warm tears slid down her cheeks, but she remained in her face-down position until she heard the key turn in the lock from the outside. She recognized that sound; she’d been locked in before. With her mother out of sight, she rose up on her hands and knees and rocked back and forth, whimpering, afraid to cry out loud. She felt anxious and sick to her stomach. If she vomited and messed the sheet, she feared her mother would beat her again. She swallowed the gag in her throat; afraid to move from the bed until her mother returned.

* * *

Sarah, up on her knees in her L.A. apartment, pounded the bean bag with a vengeance. “DAMN HER! DAMN HER!” she raged with each whack against leather until her fists and elbows were rubbed raw. Then she collapsed across the bean bag, emotionally spent.

Dry-eyed after four or five minutes, she rolled over on her back and tucked her hands under her head. She felt crazed; this emotional retching had to stop. Sarah vowed

she'd stop reading self-help books—at least for a week. And she wouldn't brood about this memory; she'd wait and discuss it with Carla. "Enough already!" as Grandma Etta used to say.

Sarah settled on a velveteen pillow in the therapist's office. She removed her shoes, stretched her legs out in front of her, leaned back against the wall, and waited for Carla to say something.

"Your body looks relaxed in that position, Sarah, but your mouth looks like you've swallowed alum. What's going on? Have you given any thought to the question I asked about molestation?"

Sarah hunched forward over her bent knees and moaned, "Yes, damn it, I have. I remembered a strange man . . ."

When Sarah finished relating the episode in the laundry room, she looked directly at Carla and said, "He couldn't have molested me; I clearly remember landing hard on the cement when he dropped me. I ran away. So, if nothing happened, why do I feel so dirty and soiled? And why did I stand there like a dummy?"

"You know the answers; you just don't know that you know—yet. There are undoubtedly many reasons for your compliance. One obvious explanation is the fact that you were trained to obey adults without question.

"I'm not sure why you feel soiled by that experience, but I do know that you were beaten when you might better have been cuddled and consoled. That stranger picking you up was trauma enough without physical and emotional abuse from your mother. It seems to me that every time your mother 'saved your life,' she threatened it. She 'saved you' but there was no one to save *you* from her."

Eyes downcast, Sarah half-whispered, "I feel very, very sad."

"Stay with your feeling. Once again, you were beaten by an unreasonable parent."

“Sometimes I feel like I despise my mother. I’m ashamed of that; I feel like I’m breaking a commandment or something. At times I hate her, yet I feel love for her, too. How can I love someone who consistently beat me to a pulp?”

“Conflicted feelings are difficult to deal with, but honor *all* your feelings. Your mother, harsh and severe, even cruel, showed you no mercy when she beat you into submission; but I’m certain there were times she treated you with loving kindness. Can you remember any happy time spent with her?”

“It ain’t easy!” Then, pensive for a moment or two, she said, “I do appreciate my mother’s adventurous spirit and her intellectual curiosity. She took me to museums, even to World’s Fairs—I saw the California Fair on Treasure Island, and the World’s Fair in New York City, both in the same year—my father must have had money way back in the Depression. Those fairs were great! I saw television years before it was produced for home viewing. I saw a motorized dummy — damn, I can’t think of the name for it.”

“Do you mean, robot?”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. I’ve been a robot most of my life. Dummy/robot, that’s me.”

Carla ignored Sarah’s self-deprecating remarks and asked, “Can you think of anything you admire about your mother?”

Sarah hesitated, then answered, “She’s kind, to others at least. When Bob and I were flooded out of our first home, she brought bread and milk for us and all the neighbors. Once when I was in my teens, I caught her in the kitchen taking capsules apart, and I asked her what she was doing. She said, ‘Your father takes too many sleeping pills and that worries me, so when he’s out of the house, I take the capsules apart and replace the medicine with sugar. He doesn’t know the difference and sleeps like a baby.’

“I guess she really did love my father. No matter how many times they separated, they always got back together. During the last few years of their marriage, they seemed

closer and happier than ever before. What I don't understand is what they saw in each other. They were so different."

"We often choose a mate who will express the parts of ourselves we're uncomfortable with. Your father expressed your mother's anger, just as Bob expressed yours. No one really knows what goes on between any couple — half the time they don't know themselves. That's what therapy's about, understanding ourselves, and not rubbing our flies off on anyone else."

"Do you want to say anything more about your mother?"

"She loved to read, and so do I. I had my first library card when I was in fourth grade. She taught me to knit and sew, to 'set a nice table,' as one blind date said about his ex-wife. With a wistful smile, Sarah said, "My mother bought me a formal for my first prom. My father screamed about the price, but my mother insisted. The dress was expensive, but God it was beautiful; a delicate shade of pink with layers and layers of tulle. My mother emptied one of her powder boxes, lined the bottom with pink velvet, ruffled the net—that perfectly matched the tulle on the dress—around the box, and it magically became an exquisite little purse. She sewed on a matching pink satin cord so I could tie it around my wrist. I wish I still had that memento; it was priceless. She was, and is, clever with a needle. She was hateful to me most of the time; why did she put herself out that time just to please me?"

"No one is hateful *all* the time. Perhaps she created that little gem to please you, but my guess is—and I may be wrong—that she pleased herself. If you looked and behaved like a model child—a perfect doll—it reflected on her mothering."

"Yeah! Public display and private beatings. But she was kind and motherly when she held my forehead while I vomited in the toilet."

"Did you vomit frequently?"

"Sure, don't most children?"

"Did yours?"

"Come to think of it, no. So, why was I always heaving?"

“I suggest you were throwing up the abuse you couldn’t express any other way. Tell me, if you can, your most frightening childhood experience.”

“That’s easy. When I was about four, my mother and I were back living with Grandma; there were about ten of us sitting around Grandma’s big kitchen table — aunts, uncles, cousins, Grandpa. I sat on a couple of fat telephone books so I could reach the table and watched Grandma fry pancakes on the lids of the black cast iron stove. She flipped the golden pancakes onto a platter, poured melted butter on top, and served them to everyone but Grandpa. All the pancakes were uniform in size — maybe four or five inches. Everyone dug into their pancakes, but not me. I asked Grandma why there was no place at the table for her. ‘Eat, Sarah,’ she said, ‘and stop asking questions. I have work to do.’

“Grandma spread butter in a big, black frying pan and melted it on the stove, then she poured in batter and stood over it waiting for the pancake to bubble before she turned it over. She put the oversized pancake on a plate and served it to her husband. The pancake was enormous, or appeared that way to my child eyes and I pouted and whined. ‘I want a big pancake like Grandpa.’

“My mother, sitting next to me, said, ‘Only Grandpa gets a big pancake. Eat the pancakes on your plate before they get cold.’

“I pleaded for a big pancake like Grandpa’s and I must have begged one time too many because my mother yanked me off the chair and the telephone books banged on the floor as she opened a door from the kitchen that led to the basement. She hauled me down those dark basement steps and held my arm in a death grip as we stepped into an even darker cave of blackness.

“A row of dusty steel lockers — like the ones in high school — were lined up against one wall and she pushed the latches up and down until she found one that was unlocked and pushed me inside. The steel rattled as she slammed the door and shouted from the other side, ‘YOU’RE A VERY BAD GIRL!’

“She’d shoved me into a spider’s web in that two-by-four locker; it was pitch black, and it itched all over. Huddled in a corner, I wailed and howled. *‘Lets me out! Lets me out!’* I felt creepy-crawlies on my bare arms and legs and blubbered plaintively, *‘Mommy, Mommy, me be good. Peasse, peasse lets me out.’*”

Sarah looked like a terrified child as she grimaced and blinked repeatedly. “I felt something run over my ankle. God! It must have been a mouse!” Sarah’s eyelids flickered as she shuddered and said, “I let out a blood-curdling scream that bounced back at me from four metal walls. Safe outside my prison—and it was a prison with me in solitary confinement—that wicked witch shouted, ‘I am NOT unlocking this door until you stop that screaming and carrying on. I will NOT let you out until you stop crying. You’re being punished for your own good!’

“I crammed myself into a corner; one high-top shoe pressed hard atop the other, sniffled and shivered, but controlled my tears. That ‘jailer’ finally unlocked the door and let me out.”

Sarah trembled as she crossed her arms under her breast and rocked back and forth. “No wonder I hate elevators,” she said. “I’m locked in, enclosed in a metal chamber. But an elevator is a helluva lot bigger than that metal locker. No wonder I asked my landlord to remove all the doors in my apartment. Well, not the bathroom door, but all the rest. I HATE AND DESPISE LOCKED DOORS! Oh, shit! That’s a perfect example of how today’s actions are based on yesterday’s fears.”

“Good insight, Sarah. No doubt about it; your mother was—is—a sick woman. That trauma also taught you not to ask for anything. To survive, you had to repress your wants and needs to the point that you no longer knew what you wanted or needed. As a child, your survival depended on that learned behavior. That behavior worked for you then. Now, as an adult, it doesn’t. Adults express their likes and dislikes; they ask for what they want and are willing to accept ‘no’ for an answer.

“As a child, you were not allowed to feel or express your emotions, and that omission literally made you sick. Now you can trace your stomach aches and frequent

vomiting to your abusive childhood. Your mother's behavior was atrocious. For an adult to perpetrate that kind of suffering on a defenseless child is unconscionable."

"Yeah, if my mother wasn't Jewish, she'd have made a great member of Hitler's S.S."

"You're joking again."

"You're right, damn it. Why do I always do that?"

"No one is so consistent that they 'always' behave in the same way. However, early training sticks unless, through therapy, you unravel your past and change your behavior. There's no mystery to your joking rather than feeling discomfort—you were trained since childhood to ignore your feelings. You use humor as a defense."

Trembling, Sarah shrugged her shoulders and stretched her neck from side to side.

"What are you feeling right now?"

"Disgust."

"Your word, 'disgust,' is an adult's word, but your body remembers the sadness, fear, and anger you repressed. Your little girl feelings won't go away until you understand and deal with them. You may cry and grieve for your 'lost child,' but stay with the pain; it will pass. Be patient. Change takes time. Give yourself the same compassion you give to others."

At 9:00 on another dateless Saturday night, Sarah rinsed a sable brush under running water in the bathroom. In the adjacent studio/bedroom, the radio blared another love song. "Love and marriage . . . go together like a horse and carriage . . ." She carried a clutch of clean brushes back to the studio, laid them on her work table, and switched radio stations. Love songs blared from every station and she turned the radio off.

In silence, Sarah fingered brushes, pencils, and tubes of paint. Only willpower, determination, and self-discipline had kept her working in the studio since she'd seen Carla on Tuesday. Last week, she had good solid work to show for her effort. This week Sarah's temper spilled with the turpentine. Paint brushes refused to cooperate. Glue

refused to bind and collage paper wrinkled and slipped through her fingers. She seemed to destroy everything she touched. She dismissed the possibility that her mood tonight had anything to do with what she'd learned in therapy and chose to blame herself for being clumsy. She was hyper-critical of her 'failures,' and brooded over her lack of skill. She doubted her talent and feared she had nothing more to say as an artist. She no longer had that gasp of excitement when she completed a project; that moment of completion, like a mental orgasm. Now her chosen profession felt like nothing but 'make work,' lacking in both challenge and excitement. Sarah considered the possibility that she no longer wanted to be an artist. That thought terrified her: if she wasn't an artist she'd be nothing.

She longed to talk to Ralph. He understood the artist's isolation and self-doubt. He'd console and encourage her. "Come on, Baby," he'd say. "Your muse will return, it always does. Give yourself a break."

Sarah, give herself a break? *That* would be new behavior. Others had tried to break her spirit, hinder her growth and independence, and with no one to 'put her down,' she treated herself with the same disrespect.

Gluing a narrow blue ribbon to a sliver of mirror, Sarah wondered if her muse would ever return. "Where's he gone?" she asked herself. Why did she think of her muse as male? An artist's muse is sexless. Creativity has no gender.

The ribbon slipped off the edge of the mirror and Sarah pushed it aside. She rubbed her fingers together to remove dried glue, and once again turned on the radio. Another love song blared. Disgusted, she flipped the dial off. She missed Ralph; he'd treated her badly much of the time, but he was a warm body. When he discussed art with her, his faults didn't matter.

She toyed with the idea of calling Glo. Maybe her friend was also dateless this miserable Saturday night. She decided against it. Gloria had no understanding of the creative process. She had more education than Sarah; could recite more facts and

statistics, but rarely expressed an original idea. Ralph didn't have a degree—masters or otherwise—but he, at least, was inventive. Originality, to Sarah, was a virtue.

Hoping to soak away her misery, Sarah poured a stream of bubble bath under hot running water. The tub filled and she cautiously dipped in one toe—scalding herself would be the last straw. The bath water hot but tolerable, she eased into the tub. Leaning back, a hot washcloth on her neck and shoulders, she drew one knee up to her chest. She scratched her calf and, feeling something under her nails, she inspected the offal and flicked away the dead skin. Sarah bathed every day, sometimes twice—a shower in the morning and a bath at night—but no amount of scrubbing could wash away her feeling that, somehow, she was filthy and impure.

Unintentionally, Sarah touched the vertical scar that embroidered her abdomen; the scar that had widened with each surgery. She traced her fingertip back and forth across the length of it, then pushed her heels against the bottom of the tub and her stomach rose above the bubbles. She investigated the scar and discovered it was no longer red; in fact the scar appeared whiter than the rest of her skin. Her inner scars, however, remained scarlet.

Sinking back into the water, Sarah fingered the flap of scar tissue at the entrance to her vagina. The obstetrician had sliced her to make room for the twin's delivery. It seemed as though everyone wanted a slice of her.

Her frame of mind improved somewhat when she remembered the words of a black woman—a friend of Ralph's: "Ah hurts high up between my two big toes." Sarah knew all about *that* pain, yet she couldn't help but smile at the woman's description. Life was so damn painful; humor was a blessing—a saving grace. She wondered why Carla discouraged it. She pondered that question for a while, then concluded that Carla enjoyed a laugh as much as anyone, but practiced authentic and appropriate behavior.

Sarah's friends enjoyed her wit; sometimes she could even provoke a laugh out of her mother. Elizabeth was so literal that she often missed Sarah's sardonic humor, but if she got it, she'd say, "You've inherited your father's sense of humor."

Thinking of Elizabeth, Sarah toyed with the idea of phoning her to say, “I’m sorry you suffered when your foot was cut.” Maybe then mother and daughter could discuss the incident and forgive one another.

Forget it! Last week when Elizabeth called, Sarah asked, “Do you remember my dog, Snoogie? Was she run over? Did you try to protect me from the truth by telling me you’d given her away?”

“She wasn’t run over. I gave her away; she was bad. She pee-peed on the rug.”

Sarah felt heartbroken a second time. Snoogie wasn’t bad; she was precious. She’d waited for Sarah every school day in the playground. With kindergarten over, Sarah and Snoogie would race home, side by side, until that fateful day when the dog couldn’t be found. Sarah had mournfully walked home alone, burst into the apartment above the butcher shop, and asked in a doleful tone, “Where’s Snoogie?”

“I gave her away,” Elizabeth barked, “and if you’re not a good girl, I’ll give you away, too.” Sarah knew that was more than a threat; she’d already been boarded on a farm.

Rather than cry over a long lost pet, Sarah snuffed and twisted her neck from side to side. Sarah’s moods shifted up one minute, down the next, like a ride on a roller coaster. As a child she’d reached for the carousel’s brass ring and captured it seven times. She would have had an eighth if the attendant hadn’t plucked the prize within an inch of Sarah’s fingers. She’d been cheated out of what was rightfully hers, more than once; gypped out of a happy childhood and a mother who loved her, bamboozled by Bob, and hoodwinked by Ralph. Sarah felt like a total failure. She was filled with self-loathing. There had to be more to life than work; more to life than what was on her back, in her stomach, or between her legs. But what? She needed a new direction — a new goal. If tragedy came in clumps, why couldn’t good fortune?

CHAPTER 42

Week by week, Sarah gained understanding of her behavior, but changes in her conduct were more gradual. When the urge to call Ralph felt overpowering, she'd dial his number and hang up before anyone had time to answer. She felt foolish, but knew she wasn't the only woman with crazy behavior when it came to men.

On dateless Saturday nights, Shirl and Sarah would avoid the long lines for the popular movies and enjoy French or Italian films at a small theatre that showed foreign releases. On the way home they'd fantasize about what it would be like living in Europe. Later, ready for bed, Sarah would continue the fantasy and her mind would wander from one exotic location to another.

In February, at the opening of a new gallery in Westwood Village, she met Keith Kerrigan, a thirty-three-year-old artist. Keith, who struggled to be accepted in the avant-garde milieu of the L.A. art scene, had a fey quality and wore an expression on his face that invited calamity. He had so many premature worry lines on his forehead it looked like a flock of birds in flight. Not much taller than Sarah, weighing a few pounds more, he seemed so needy that Sarah, by comparison, appeared to have her act together. Keith's gentle behavior and subdued personality, in sharp contrast to Ralph's, appealed to her, and his blonde hair and pale complexion were definitely not reminders of Ralph.

Keith and Sarah exchanged phone numbers the night they met. One night he'd call her, the next she'd call him. They discussed art, art, art, both reticent to reveal personal information about their backgrounds or emotional lives.

They attended gallery openings, museum shows, and any other function that was FREE. Keith had even less money than Sarah, and once again, it was she who treated to the ice cream cones and an occasional movie. The two joyful playmates, who avoided their loneliness with companionship, picnicked in the park and relished Sarah's home-

fried chicken, potato salad, and chocolate cake with butter frosting. They rode the teeter-totter as equals, and used the children's swings independently.

At first, Sarah felt relieved that Keith hadn't made a pass, but as the weeks went by, she fretted that he must find her physically unappealing. She invited Keith for dinner on St. Patrick's Day, and he arrived carrying one lone yellow gladiolus, wrapped in green florist paper. She was so touched by his gift, she had to swallow hard to keep from tears. She knew the price of even one flower had cost him dearly.

At midnight, Keith prepared to depart, thanked Sarah profusely, "Dinner was great! I'm Irish, I know real corned beef and cabbage when I taste it. But, you're Jewish; where'd you learn to cook corned beef like that?"

Sarah grinned — she'd learned it from one of her mother's Irish maids — but, rather than answer, she opened the front door. Keith moved closer and leaned toward Sarah for a swift, friendly, goodnight kiss. The kiss surprised them both when it turned into something more.

Looking nonplused as he stepped back, his arms still at his sides, one hand clutching the three paint brushes Sarah had given him, he said, "You are so beautiful, it would be easy to say I love you." Still clutching the paint brushes, Keith wrapped his arms around Sarah and kissed her again with soft, sensitive lips. Between kisses, he asked, "Do you want me to stay?" and Sarah, her lips glued to his, kicked the door shut with her foot.

She'd expected Keith to be a great lover who would touch her with the same gentle tenderness he'd shown the paint brushes, and was frustrated when his fingers felt like sandpaper against her soft skin. Keith, for all his sensitivity, was another in-out-and-over man. Still, she was happy that he didn't jump out of bed and leave immediately. When a man did that, it left her feeling degraded as well as rejected.

Sunday night Keith announced, "I've really got to get a move on. I haven't had a joint since I arrived and I've got to get home and roll some." He brushed his lips against

Sarah's cheek and said, "Great time. Thanks a lot. What a fine weekend. This ought to last me for another six months."

Sarah closed the door behind him. She was utterly bewildered. Did he mean he only made love once every six months? Later she learned from Carla, that "weed" could inhibit a person sexually, despite claims to the contrary.

Keith continued to call regularly, but if she called him and suggested "What if we . . .," he responded scrappily, "We are not a we! I'm me, and you're you." So she stopped thinking up excuses to call him and waited impatiently for him to call her.

She didn't know how to label their relationship, aware they'd only slept together once. Still, it was hardly a one-night stand. The fact that he was a poor lover, and his pale, unmuscular physique contrasted poorly to Ralph's toned muscles and permanent tan, kept her from brooding about the distance that had developed between them.

In therapy she tried to sort out her feelings. "Keith says, repeatedly, that I should use my sexual energy for art the way he does. I admire his dedication but, like Picasso, I have enough energy for art and lovemaking. Obviously, he doesn't. What I don't understand is why, when he doesn't even appeal to me physically, I want to hop into bed with him when he gives me a good-bye hug.

"When I began 'sleeping around' after my divorce, I could say 'no,' even to an attractive man if he stood his distance. Now Keith, an asexual man, hugs me and I want to hop into bed with him. What the hell is the matter with me? Am I nuts or something?"

"You are not nuts. You do have trouble with boundaries. You can say 'no' to a man who isn't in your personal space, but not to one who is. Remember the doctor? Keith keeps you off-balance with double messages, the way your mother does. You've been raised on a kiss and a kick. You are familiar with being kept off-balance.

"Have you ever wondered why you remained a virgin until you met Bob and didn't 'sleep around,' as you label it, before you were married?"

“Yes, I’ve questioned that. The truth is, I’m grateful I’m not a teenager now; they have no guidelines for behavior. When I was a teen you were either a bad girl or a good girl — a virgin. It was said repeatedly, ‘They sleep with bad girls, but they marry good girls. No man wants to marry anyone that’s not a virgin.’ “

“So the rules kept you safe?”

“Yes, then. Now I have no guidelines, no rules except what I learned in marriage and from the Catholic church. If your husband wanted to make love, you acquiesced, whether you were in the mood or not. Catholic women weren’t permitted ‘headaches’; they were meant to produce multiple Catholic babies.”

“You sound bitter.”

“I am. If I hadn’t had a hysterectomy, I might have ended up with a brood like Louise, like the old woman who lived in the shoe. It pisses me off that a bright, intelligent woman like Lou has never had a chance to be anything but a mother.”

“Are you angry about Louise’s life, or your own?”

“Both. I gave that bastard Bob my best, and now I’m heading into old age alone. I’ll be forty-nine my next birthday, and I still don’t know what I want to be when I grow up!”

“Was there anything about Bob that reminded you of your father?”

“Not at first. Bob seemed so different, but as the years passed, he became Daddy’s clone — tight with money, loose with anger. My father and Bob looked at me with a mixture of pride and ownership and I mistook it for love. I didn’t know I knew that until it popped out of my mouth.”

“So you are beginning to recognize that some of your father’s behavior was not loving or beneficial to you?”

Sarah rubbed her nose with her fingers, sighed, then laughed and said, “I must be on to the truth, my nose itches.”

“What does that mean?”

“My father said if your nose itched, you were telling the truth. If one of us spilled the salt, he’d flip the shaker over his shoulder, laugh, and say, ‘Now we won’t fight.’ Sometimes that worked and sometimes it didn’t. He always said, ‘Thank God’ and knocked on wood after a statement like, ‘Business is good.’ “

Looking around for some wood to knock on, Sarah said, “Thank God my father gave me positive attention or I wouldn’t know how to relate to men at all.”

“Some of his attention was positive, not all of it. Some of his behavior had sexual connotations, like the time he beat you for being late, or when he danced with you and not your mother.”

“Not that again! Why do you keep trying to convince me that my father’s behavior toward me was abnormal?”

“I’m not trying to convince you of anything. I do feel that you are still unwilling to admit that some of your father’s behavior was inappropriate. You showed me a picture last year of the two of you. You looked about sixteen. There was something about the way he looked at you that was unsettling.”

“I remember that picture. We were just horsing around in the back yard.” Sarah looked down at her ankles and said in a determined voice, “If you think my father molested me, you’re wrong. I know he never touched me in any inappropriate way.”

“I believe you. Do you believe yourself?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Trust your feelings. I am not suggesting that your father’s behavior was physically incestuous. What I am suggesting is that his flirting with you, and giving you so much attention as a teen-ager, may have been emotional incest.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Obviously your father didn’t receive what he needed from his wife. He had a mistress early on, and in you he found a comparable ally, another person with his spirit, his humor, his zest for life. The more he chose you for companionship, the more he aggravated your mother and the more demanding she was of you. She is a person, it

seems, who is incapable of real intimacy, so you and your father filled each other's needs by bonding."

"Is that so bad?"

"I'm not labeling it. What I'm saying is it's good that you had a loving relationship with your father, you certainly didn't, and don't, with your mother. We can love someone and still acknowledge that some of their behavior is unacceptable."

"I have to admit that I learned to crave the attention I received from my father. I'm still searching for a man who will play with me, laugh with me, someone who enjoys life. I've forgotten how."

Reluctantly, Sarah acknowledged, "Okay, if what you say is true, why am I still angry at my mother but not at my father?"

"Your father, despite his imperfections, gave you something back — love — your mother never has."

"Is that why I'm so hooked on men?"

"Hooked on men? That's another way of saying you're addicted to them, isn't it?"

"Addicted! I thought I understood you months ago when you said it wasn't sex I craved, but tenderness and love."

"Comfort and love are what you seek, not sex. I'm certain of that. But, think about this: if you want to say no and you continue to say yes, it's an irresistible impulse — a compulsion. Compulsive behaviors lead to addiction. Keith is addicted to marijuana, Ralph to gambling, Bob and your father were alcoholics. If a person compulsively eats too much, they become fat as well as addicted. Some folks shop without restraint and become poor as well as addicted. Sex seems to be your drug of choice. Any time we can't control our behavior, there's a good chance we are easing our anxiety and tension with an addiction."

"Now I have to add sex addiction to my other 'sins.' Are you saying I'm a sexaholic?"

“Label yourself if you need to, but that’s not the point.”

“What is?”

“Six months ago, if I had persisted with this line of inquiry, I’m certain you would have walked out of this office in a huff. Now I believe you’re ready to acknowledge whatever truth you find. Are you aware that your mind and body seem to have separate agendas? Your mind says no and your body says yes. When our emotions and actions don’t jibe, we feel conflicted.”

“I definitely feel conflicted. But I have no body. From the neck down, I don’t exist. I live in my head. I always have.”

“If you have no body, then it doesn’t matter what happens to it, does it? Whether it’s beaten, attacked roughly in the name of love, or whatever. As an abused child, you learned to numb your feelings and your body. Are your feelings ever numbed when you’re making love?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you’re making love, is your mind ever on something else?”

“Sure, lots of times I’ll be thinking about what I’ll feed him after we finish or some other foolishness — like he doesn’t smell as sweet as Bob. It’s only when my body takes over that I stop thinking, and that’s one reason I like making love; I can get out of my head for awhile.”

“No one respected you, or your body, while you were growing up. You were treated as an object. Now you objectify yourself and don’t know how to protect yourself from abuse.”

“Are you suggesting that I use sex as a numbing agent?”

“What do you think?”

“Hell, I don’t know.”

“Did your father ever make sexual jokes in your presence?”

“No, his humor was never salacious . . . well, maybe once. One night at dinner my mother told him her cousin Roselin was marrying some jerk. He laughed and said,

‘He’d need a crane to lift him on and off!’ I didn’t know what he was talking about, but from the sound of my mother saying ‘Bart, stop that talk in front of Sarah,’ I knew it must be bad. Mostly my father’s language was scatological. He punctuated his sentences with words that described defecation. ‘Shit’ was his favorite word.”

“Why do you think people laugh when someone says ‘shit’?”

“I have no idea. I just know that I do, and so does everyone else.”

“Children, and the child in the adult, feel nervous when they hear certain words so they laugh and giggle. Intrinsically, there are no ‘bad words,’ it’s the label society puts on them.”

“That’s for sure. In Chaucer’s time, fuck and fart were ordinary, everyday words. I still remember one line from *Canterbury Tales*, ‘Let fleet with a fart.’ “

Carla laughed. “See, we’re both laughing,” she said. “Fart is just a word, like music, or shit.”

“Shit was more than a word to my mother. Every time my father said it — and that was every day — she had a fit. Yet she used that word after he died. Now, she carps at me for using it.”

“Your mother’s ‘refinement’ is a mask. She uses it as a passive-aggressive tool for control. She tried to control your father’s ‘crude talk’ so she could feel superior. She does the same thing to you.”

Sarah bit her lower lip, looked puzzled, and said, “My mother’s taste and refinement are her rare qualities that I admire; now I hear that’s phony, too.”

“Phony is the right word for most of your mother’s behavior. Your father, at least, was real, but he treated both you and your mother as objects. Their behavior toward each other is problematic. Did he try to push her away with his crudeness? Did she try to push him away by withholding her approval?”

“It’s so damn confusing. I always thought my father liked women. If he had a business problem, it was his sister he called, not his brother. Come to think of it, he used to say, “She’s smart; smarter than my brother by a long shot.”

“So, he admired intelligent women, that’s a plus, but you can’t respect women and then use them as objects for pleasure or profit. At work your father exploited women for gain. You’ve mentioned the B-girls he employed to lure men into paying for their watered down drinks, while he pocketed the profit.”

Repulsed by Carla’s interpretations, Sarah shuddered and said, “No wonder I’ve stayed in denial and fantasy land; reality is hard to digest. Maybe that’s why I was always vomiting, why I still feel nauseated much of the time.”

“For some reason—that has yet to be revealed—you don’t feel safe with men. You subconsciously defend yourself by choosing men who are unattainable, like Jack; or young, penniless men, like Ralph and Keith. Whether you believe it or not, older women do hold power over younger men. Some women are attracted to married men or priests, like your friend, Shirl. Fear of commitment is kept at bay with that behavior. Your indiscriminate choice of lovers keeps you faithful to Bob emotionally. The inappropriate men you choose protect you from a new commitment. Blaming keeps you in the victim mode and your fear of failure is another one of your hidden agendas. As we peel back layers of repressed emotions, you’ll grow in self-knowledge and self-esteem.”

Tuesday’s therapy sessions were the focus of Sarah’s week. Carla persisted in inquiring about her patient’s sex life, and Sarah tolerated her discomfort in hopes that she might eventually understand the behavior that caused her so much pain.

“Have you slept with Keith again?”

“No.”

“Have you wanted to?”

“Only when he’s in my personal space.”

“That’s a clue. Do you want him when he’s across the room?”

“No, only when he hugs me hello or good-bye.”

“What is your deepest, darkest fear?”

“That I’ll end up a strip-teaser like the ones my father hired. I’ve slept with so many men since I left Bob, I’m forgetting their names, so I must be promiscuous. If I don’t learn to respect myself and my body, I’m afraid of what I might do next. I’m so ashamed of my behavior. I feel dirty. No matter how many baths or showers I take, I never really feel clean.”

In tears, Sarah looked down at her ankles and legs and Carla pushed the tissue box closer. Tears choking her, she whined in a little girl’s voice, “I’m a bad girl. I’m naughty.” Her hands were balled in fists even as she sobbed.

“You’re angry as well as sad, aren’t you?”

“Yesssss, and I don’t know why.”

“Stretch out on the mattress and have another tantrum, perhaps you’ll find out why.”

Sarah uncurled herself from the cushion, walked slowly to the mattress, laid on her back, and kicked her feet up and down a few times, then slapped them down hard on the mattress saying, “I can’t will myself to have a tantrum when I don’t even know why I want one.”

“Kick your feet, scream, and the momentum will take over. No telling what you’ll discover with your anger.”

Sarah raised both legs and dropped them on the mattress. Then she did it again. By the third attempt, she was kicking her legs like a three-year-old, alternating her legs with accelerated speed, pounding the mattress as she screamed and bellowed in rage.

Exhausted from her outburst, she lay still, turned her face toward the therapist, and said in a hoarse voice, “A lot of good that did me. Now my throat feels sore from screaming and I don’t even have a clue why I’m so damn angry.”

“Close your eyes and relax. When you feel calm, return to your pillow and we can pursue this further.”

A minute of relaxation felt like an eternity to Sarah. She scrambled off the mattress and returned to her cushion.

“How do you feel?” Carla asked.

Sarah looked at her hands lying limp in her lap. Her eyes polished her stocking feet and ankles, as she said, “My father with his song, ‘A Good Man,’ taught me that the only way I could keep a man was by giving him ‘plenty of lovin’ morning, noon, and night. I’ve been singing that song into my tape deck for the last year, trying to teach myself to carry a tune. What I was really teaching myself was that all I had to offer a man was sex. That’s bullshit. I have plenty to offer anyone. I need love and caring, and I give rather than receive it. I want that to change. As you said, it’s a miracle I didn’t become a prostitute at seventeen. If I’d been as rebellious then as I am now, I might have ended up working as a B-girl, shimmying up to men in a low-cut dress. Fat chance of me being a B-girl, or a stripteaser, my breasts are too small.”

“Your insight is good, but your humor is still self-deprecating. You assume if you downgrade yourself first, it won’t hurt so much if someone else does. Cows have large udders, woman have breasts, and a woman’s sex appeal doesn’t depend on their size.”

Sarah twisted her neck back and forth and said, “I get it, that’s why Ralph said, ‘We called each other nigger; that way it didn’t hurt so much when we heard it from someone else.’ Therapy is like unraveling a ball of yarn. I find one end and it twists into another.”

“When you make a serious statement, then smile and crack a joke, you imply to your listener that you don’t have to be taken seriously. When your expression is as serious as your words, your behavior is congruent and matches your feelings.”

“So, when my expression doesn’t match my words, I give double messages, too.”

“Right. You deserve to be loved for your essence; you’re basically good. When guile was given out, you were behind the door. There isn’t one bit of cunning, deceit, or duplicity in you.”

“I’m not smart enough to be tricky!” Sarah laughed, then caught herself and said, “Thanks for the compliment,” and shut her mouth.

Carla applauded, “You’re like the cowardly lion in the *Wizard of Oz*. You call yourself weak when your character is actually very strong or you wouldn’t have survived. Without your creativity, you might have ended up with breakdowns like your mother. Worse still, you might not have survived at all. Don’t dump on yourself. You’re growing and changing by leaps and bounds. Day by day, your new behavior will be automatic and you’ll respond appropriately, rather than impulsively reacting. With each success, your self-esteem will increase.”

Sarah’s shoulders straightened and she sat up expressing physical self-esteem and pride in herself. “I know I’m strong; showing strength in my childhood would have been dangerous.

“I don’t know how I know that; I just do. I have courage, I’m sure of that. As I look back at my life with new understanding, I’m proud that I didn’t just curl up in a ball and die after each horrendous event. I’m a survivor. I get down, way down. My inner flame sputters, but then bursts upward again. That’s a good gene I acquired from my father. I still have a long way to go before my behavior is consistent with my ideals.”

“Give yourself time. You’ll make it.”

On the drive home, down Wilshire Boulevard, Sarah felt confident as she considered her lovers. They were all interchangeable; different faces, different bodies, different colors, different pricks, but they were all the same — takers. Every last one of them.

Before Sarah turned the key in the lock she heard the ringing phone. She hurriedly unlocked the door and, leaving it ajar, she rushed to the phone. “Hello.” Hearing her mother’s disagreeable voice, her stomach churned. She felt nauseous as she held the phone in one hand and removed the purse straps from her shoulder with the other and dropped it to the carpeting.

“Why haven’t I heard from you?” Elizabeth scolded. “When I’m a hundred and you’re eighty, you will still be my child. You should call your mother more often.”

Sarah settled down on her desk chair, still wearing her jean jacket, sighed, and said, "I've been busy."

"That's no excuse. I'm your mother and . . ."

Responding to her mother's, "Are you listening to me?" Sarah contributed little to Elizabeth's monologue. When she could no longer tolerate the sound of her mother's whining, Sarah interrupted and proudly mentioned that she would be included in a gallery show at the end of the month.

Elizabeth's response: "How dare you interrupt me when I'm speaking." Then with sarcasm ringing in her words, she said, "Are you still trying to be an artist?" Without waiting for a reply, she continued, "You can't be an artist any more than I can. Stop wasting your time on art shows and get a good secretarial job so you can earn enough to buy a new hat and dress and get out of those dreadful blue jeans you wear all the time."

Sarah ignored her mother's latest rebuke and hung up as soon as possible, feeling as miserable as she had when she'd entered Carla's office. Her good feelings once again dissipated.

CHAPTER 43

The following Tuesday, Sarah began her therapy session with a frequent complaint: “My mother is a royal pain in the ass! I felt good about myself last week, when I left your office, but after talking—or rather listening—to her complain and criticize, I felt awful. Really dreadful. I wish I could speak up and shout: ‘GET THE HELL OUT OF MY FACE!’ As it is, I complain to you the way she complains to me and then I’m disgusted with myself. I don’t want to end up a whiny faultfinder like her.”

“I don’t consider what you tell me to be complaining; you want to understand and change your behavior. Does she?”

“Are you kidding? She hasn’t changed one iota since I was a child; only her tools of torture. As a kid, she smacked me with a hair brush. Now she smacks me with her mouth. If I sit anywhere near her, when I’m in Chicago, she constantly jabs me with her elbow. On the phone, she jabs me with put-downs. There is no way to please that woman or win her approval. Just once I’d like to scream, ‘I’M HANGING UP! DON’T BOTHER CALLING AGAIN, YOU WITCH!’”

“Why don’t you do just that?”

“I’m afraid to. What if I pushed her over the edge and she had another breakdown. I can barely take care of myself, let alone her. When she calls and I hear that crackled, raspy voice, I’m a wreck. I feel like a frightened child—and that’s ridiculous. I’m a grandmother, for God’s sake.”

“She wants you to feel insecure. It’s one of her ploys. She speaks to you in a demeaning, dictatorial way, and keeps her power and authority. She’s behaved that way for so long that when you hear her voice you feel like a defenseless child. She’s a bully, you know. One day you’ll feel empowered, even with her, and you’ll call her bluff.”

“Intellectually, I know you’re right, but emotionally, when I hear that voice, I’m four or five—maybe younger—and scared to death she’ll get me. I clamp my mouth shut while my stomach churns. I endure until I can’t stand listening one more second, then I make an excuse and hang up.”

“That’s how you survived your childhood, by not answering back. As an adult, you don’t have to accept abusive behavior from anyone, including your mother. Have you ever considered ‘divorcing’ her?”

“I couldn’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“Well, I suppose on some level I love her, and I’m always hoping she’ll change and love me back. Besides, one of the commandments is ‘Honor thy father and thy mother.’ Tattling on either one of my parents, even to you, makes me feel guilty and disloyal.”

“One of the characteristics of an alcoholic and/or dysfunctional family is the demand for absolute loyalty. Did your mother ever warn ‘What goes on in this family is no one else’s business’?”

“All the time . . . and she’d add, ‘Don’t you dare discuss our family with your friends.’”

“As an only child, that left you feeling isolated, didn’t it?”

“I suppose . . . I never questioned it. I just assumed my mother was right and kept my mouth shut. Besides, I thought our family was typical, that all children were beaten. ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ was one of my mother’s favorite expressions. Now I have no idea what ‘typical’ is.”

“Do you mean what ‘normal’ is?”

“That’s what I mean. I just remembered something. My father used to ‘goose’ my mother and me. He’d laugh his head off when we squealed and jumped. I thought that must be a way to get a laugh, so when I was an eighth grader, I goosed a girlfriend and she told me, in no uncertain terms, how disgusting my behavior was and wanted to

know where I'd learned a trick like that. Naturally I couldn't confess that I'd learned it from my father, so I ignored her question, apologized profusely, and never goosed anyone ever again."

Sarah looked pathetic. "I know you'll say that has sexual connotations. When I was goosed, my pelvis thrust forward. Why are men such animals? Bob used to goose me, too. Once he did it at the opera. All I could do was glare at him. I didn't want to cause a scene. That's really disgusting. Why did I tolerate such behavior?"

"That's a good question. You're beginning to remember many details of growing up with abusive parents, but I have a feeling there are still large gaps in your memory. Under hypnosis you might be able to fill in the blanks. Are you willing to try?"

"Why not," Sarah answered without hesitation, then paused and asked in a suspicious voice, "What if I'm really so angry I want to kill someone, could I do something like that under hypnosis?"

"Under hypnosis, your guard is down and you will be able to feel and express emotions you are unable to express consciously. However, don't fear that I have the power to make you say or do anything that goes against your basic value system. For example, when I first learned how beneficial therapeutic hypnosis could be, I hypnotized a client who was a professional artist, like you. I gave her post-hypnotic suggestions like, 'When you are awake, you will not be able to see the color of your sweater, or feel it's texture.' I also told her that when I clapped my hands and she 'awoke,' her first action would be to knock over the waste paper basket.

"I clapped my hands, she pushed over the waste basket, and then informed me that her sweater was red and had a nubby texture. Then she said, 'Don't ever tell another artist that they can't see color or feel texture.' She was right and I never have. Therapists learn from their clients, too."

"Thanks. Now I feel a little safer. If you told me I couldn't see color or feel texture, I'm sure I'd respond as she did."

“Okay then, let’s begin. Gather up three cushions and lie flat on your back across them, or if you prefer, lie on the mattress.”

“No mattress, thank you. I don’t want to have a tantrum, I want information.”

Sarah stretched out on three cushions pushed together and faced Carla’s desk as directed. She watched the metronome hand swing back and forth and within seconds, she entered into a deep hypnotic state.

“Sarah, you are thirteen years old. Nod your head if you’re afraid to be late.”

Sarah nodded, and Carla said, “Tell me why you’re afraid.”

“My father beat me for being two minutes late.”

Carla asked several other questions, already certain of the answers. “You are four years old, Sarah. You are enclosed in a locker in a dark basement. How do you feel?”

Sarah’s shoulder’s drew up to her ears; she shivered and said in a little girl’s voice, “Scarredid.”

“You are still four years old, Sarah. Were you frightened like this some other time?”

Sarah’s chin dragged down to her chest and she opened and closed her mouth in silent screams. Her eyes remained tightly closed but the lids fluttered as she trembled and sniffled.

“You are four years old, Sarah. What are you afraid of?”

Sniffing, her lower lip puffed out, Sarah whimpered, “Mommy’s paying wit ah dolly.” Sniff, sniff, sniff.

“You’ll be waking up soon and when you do, I want you to remember the doll. I want Sarah, the adult, to tell me what little Sarah feared. If you understand, nod your head.”

Sarah nodded and Carla said, “I’m going to count down from ten to one, and with each number you will feel more alert. When I snap my fingers, you will be wide awake, alert, and will remember everything clearly.

“Ten, nine, eight . . . SNAP!”

Sitting up, her eyes open, Sarah looked dazed, but awake.

“Pull a cushion over to the wall and get comfortable before we talk.”

Sarah remained silent as she lowered her body to the pillow and sat quietly waiting for Carla to begin.

“Do you remember telling me about your mother’s doll?”

Sarah sucked in her lips and her jaw moved back and forth, but she seemed unable to speak.

“Are you having difficulty remembering?”

Sarah’s body shuddered as a deep sigh filled her lungs with air. “I remember,” she said, “but it’s so hideous I wonder if I imagined it.”

“Awake, we can daydream and use our imagination as we do when we dream at night. Under hypnosis, what we recall is not imagined, but a lost reality. Tell me what you remember.”

Twisting her neck from side to side, Sarah stretched her head back and sighed, “Oh shit!” She shuddered again and said, “I don’t know why I was being punished, but I remember my mother dragging me by the arm up the attic steps—the only light was the candle she held in her other hand.”

Wringing her hands and wiggling on the cushion, Sarah opened and closed her mouth several times without speaking.”

“What else do you remember?”

Twisting and squirming, Sarah’s mouth opened wide and, gagging, she wrapped her arms across her breast and rocked back and forth.

“Do you want to take a break?”

Sarah swallowed hard, coughed, uncovered her breasts, and continued to rock back and forth.

“What can I do to help you feel safe enough to tell me?”

Folding her arms across her chest again and, rocking, Sarah whimpered, sniffled, caught her breath, and blubbered, “I’m so scared.”

Carla knelt by her side, wrapped her arms around the sniffing child, held her tight, and patted her back while Sarah sobbed.

When mucous from her nose threatened to drip to her chin, Sarah pulled away and reached for a tissue. After she blew her nose, she looked at Carla and said in a plaintive voice, “Thanks. I think I can tell you now.”

She sighed again, and in an adult voice said, “When we reached the attic, my mother let go of my arm to close the door. In a threatening voice she said, “Stand still. Don’t move an inch.” The candle light was hidden by her body and it was pitch black, like the basement—Oh, God,” Sarah shuddered, “the basement trauma must have happened before this. I stood absolutely still. I was so terrified she’d lock me up again that I wet my pants. Whether she knew or not, she didn’t let on, but she crossed the room and melted wax into a chipped china saucer and then prodded the lit candle into it.

“Then she returned to me and pulled me toward . . .” Sarah bent her head again and whimpered.

“I see how painful this is for you. Do you want to stop?”

“Yes. I just can’t figure out what I remember. It’s hard to fathom. Her behavior was so crazy.”

“Our time is almost up, anyway. If you need to talk to me before our next session, leave a message with my answering service and I’ll call you back. You don’t have to suffer through this alone, remember that.”

Sarah did suffer through it alone. What she remembered could not be shared over the telephone, not even with Carla. At the next session, she announced, “I did my kicking and beating the bean bag at home, now I think I’ll be able to tell you what happened. My mother dragged me to an old black leather sofa, layered with dust, plopped me in a corner, and demanded that I not to move an inch. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I watched the candle flame wave from the cold draft in the attic, and I shivered and sneezed a couple of times from the dust, but she ignored me. The

windows under the dormer were small and square, like a checkerboard, and smudged with dirt. The light from the windows cast shadows across the room as I wiggled on the sofa, so cold against my bare legs. I'm sure my wet panties made it worse. Cold, and scared she'd beat me when she discovered I'd wet my pants, I sat there, huddled in a corner, sucking my thumb, straining my eyes in the dim light.

"Across from me was a mannequin with a torn black lace dress drooping over it. The dress was covered with dust, and dust had filled the empty space of the lace. Now I know it to be a mannequin, but then I thought it was a woman without a head. It was like a horror movie: boxes piled everywhere, material spilling out of holes that mice, no doubt, had chewed; broken chairs with sagging cane bottoms; a table so covered that I couldn't see the top; strange rustling noises; and an awful smell of mildew, dust, and decay.

"I was still huddled on that dusty leather sofa when I heard my mother whimper, and I turned my attention to her. She was on her knees and holding open the lid of a cedar chest with one hand while she sucked the forefinger of the other. She must have cut it on the hinge. She picked up a couple of stray books from the floor, propped up the lid, then dug through odds and ends of lace, ribbons, and crocheted dollies. One by one, she dropped the hodgepodge on the floor until she found what she wanted.

"Now it really gets scary. She pulled out this doll. It's porcelain arms and hands were intact and it was dressed in beautiful lace, ruffled at the neck, but very soiled, probably from a lot of handling. Above the ruffled neck there was nothing. The doll had no head."

Sarah sucked in her breath and shuddered. "My mother curled on that filthy attic floor, cradling that headless doll in her arms, rocking back and forth, sing-songing, 'Rock-a-bye baby, in the tree top, when the wind blows, the cradle will drop' — that's the only lullaby she ever sang to me." Sarah sniffled a couple of times and reached for a tissue, blew into it, and persevered. "She kept sing-songing to that headless doll, rocking and crooning, 'I love you the most in all the world. You're my baby-doll. I'll never love

a real baby more than I love you. You're mine.' She sat and rocked and whispered to that headless doll for a long time. I could hear every word in the stillness of that attic." Sarah's face scrunched into a mask of pain and she stopped talking.

"Do you remember anything else?" Carla asked.

"The next thing I remember is Grandma calling from the foot of the attic stairs, 'Are you up there Elizabeth? I can't find Sarah.'

"I remember my mother shouting back, 'She's with me. I'll be right down.' She laid her doll tenderly back into the chest and stuffed that pile of ribbons and cloth back on top of it, closed the lid, picked up the candle, lifted me gently off the couch and whispered, 'This is our secret, don't tell Grandma.'

"Does this make any sense at all? Could I have made it up? It really does sound like a horror movie starring Ethel Barrymore."

"It really happened, Sarah, believe it. I've observed that whenever you recall a frightening experience, you shudder. The body remembers even when the mind doesn't. Now, let's try to understand how that affected you. For example, you're a mother, would you have done anything like that to the twins?"

"Never. Absolutely not. Never."

"Why not?"

"Why would I want to frighten them the way I'd been frightened. I was terrified. I'm not a crazy woman like my mother."

"So you do recognize the craziness of your mother's behavior?"

"Sure. No sane person would sit in a dark attic, rocking and crooning to a headless doll."

"Do you know anything else about that doll?"

"I've thought about that headless doll all week, and the fact that I've used doll heads, never their bodies, in my art. I remember my mother taking me to Marshall Fields at Christmas time. She stood at the doll counter for a long time, trying to interest me. I never wanted a doll; I wanted a teddy bear. But every Christmas there was another doll

under the tree. The only one I ever played with was the doll that sucked water from a bottle and wet its diaper — early training for motherhood. Every other year she'd have to tell me to pick up the new doll and play with it. Now I understand why I hated dolls; they subconsciously reminded me of the attic."

Sarah blew air out through her lips and gritted her teeth. "Every year my mother bought me another damn doll and said the same damn thing, 'Now take good care of your dolly. Treat her gently. When I was a little girl, I had a beautiful porcelain doll. I accidentally dropped her and the beautiful head broke into a million pieces. For punishment I had to play with that headless doll; then my mother died and no one ever bought me another one. You're a lucky little girl to have a mommy who loves you so much. My mommy died when I wasn't much older than you.' She'd uncross my arms, shove the doll at me and say, 'Now, hold on tight, you don't want to drop her.'"

Looking melancholy, Sarah covered her mouth with her hand.

"What are you feeling?"

"Compassion for my mother. How awful to make a child play with a headless doll. My natural Grandmother must have been a sickie, too. Although, according to my mother, her mother was a saint. She often reminded me that my middle name, René, honored her mother, and that on her birthday, my grandmother would set a present next to her breakfast plate and she'd receive presents all day. Incredible! I'm remembering all kinds of things I'd forgotten for years. My mother also told me that when she was a teenager and mad at her sisters for leaving her to do all the cooking for her father and brothers, she'd hide in the attic. She'd say, 'No one would ever look for me there. I'd read my book by candlelight.' No wonder Grandma Etta knew where to look for her. No wonder my mother ended up the crazy one in her family — the one with a body and no head — mindless and wacko."

Sarah crossed her arms, a far-away look clouding her eyes as she said, "Maybe now I'll be able to forgive her. What a terrible life she's had."

“One day I’m sure you will. You’re a compassionate woman, but forgiving your mother doesn’t mean you have to forgive her behavior. That behavior hurt you, just as your grandmother’s actions harmed your mother. Abuse can occur throughout the generations of a family, until the pattern of dysfunction is disrupted. That’s what you’re accomplishing in therapy. An abused child can grow up to be an abuser, like your mother, or the exact opposite, like you. Did you ever beat the twins?”

“God, no. About twice a year, the week after school ended and the week before school started in the fall, their behavior would make me crazy and I’d grab the broom and whirl it over my head, threaten them and laugh. They’d race to their room on cue and hide together under one twin bed. The broom never touched them, it was a symbol, I guess. Now any time the three of us are together, the twins rag me about screaming and waving the broom like a maniac. Then they have a good laugh at my expense about the time they were giggling under the bed and Johnny grabbed the neck of the broom and shook *me* from side to side,” Sarah laughed. “I was the only one who ever got hurt in those battles.”

Sarah stopped laughing abruptly and said in a saddened voice, “I’m sure I must have swatted them a few times when they were toddlers. It wasn’t easy caring for two children, both the same age. There were so many diapers, so many dishes.”

Remembering how overwhelmed she’d felt, Sarah sighed then added, “But I never used anything but my bare hand and it was only a swat or two; never a hairbrush or anything else. I never beat them into compliance the way my mother beat me.

“Once it was more than a swat. Josh had disappeared from the back yard. Dragging Johnny with me, I scoured the neighborhood, afraid Josh was lost or hurt. I was so anxious and frustrated when I finally found him that I pulled down his trousers, right in front of his friends, and smacked his bare bottom. I’ve always regretted embarrassing him that way. My behavior was shameful.”

“Do those feelings tell you anything about your mother?”

“She must have felt lost and terrified all of her life. Her mother died when she was nine—my aunt says eleven. My aunt told me my Grandmother’s body was laid out in a casket set up in the parlor. Candles were lit all around the bier.” Sarah held her hand to her forehead, looking confused and upset as she asked, “Am I making all this up? I saw that in a movie once.”

“You may mix up a detail or two, Sarah, but what you remember did happen. Your body reflects everything your words express. No one cries, the way you have, over something they’ve imagined. Trust your feelings and yourself.”

Sarah reached for a tissue, blew her nose and looked perplexed as she asked, “Why am I able to discuss this calmly with you now, when I was hysterical after I remembered the attic under hypnosis?”

“Under hypnosis, you relived the event as a terrified four-year-old. What you experienced would be scary for an adult, but to a child with no experience on which to base her perceptions, it was traumatic. Even now, with a new understanding of your mother’s crazed behavior, your inner child may shudder when she views a headless doll, smells an odor like mildew, or hears a familiar voice on radio or television. A child doesn’t have the capacity to understand intent or purpose. When her fears are triggered she feels frightened and disconsolate; her *now* is perpetual and timeless.”

“Does that mean that for the rest of life I’m going to shake and shiver about events I don’t even consciously remember? That’s scary!”

“You may always feel stressed when you’re running late, for example, but now that you know the source of that fear, you’ll take a deep breath, comfort your inner child, and assure her that she will not be beaten for being a few minutes late. That’s what I mean when I say, ‘You need to re-parent yourself.’ “

“Take a deep breath? That’s a laugh. When I was a kid, I couldn’t blow up a balloon or whistle a tune; I still can’t.”

“You’ve mentioned that before. Perhaps, under hypnosis, you’ll remember why.”

Sarah's nose wrinkled as she said, "I still hate the disgusting odor of mildew. When my father rented a cabin, on one of our trips to Florida—they had no motels way back then — if I smelled mildew, I'd rush outside and sit on the steps until my mother forced me to come inside."

Sighing again, her shoulder's sagging, Sarah asked in a plaintive voice, "Is everything I do as a neurotic adult based on some trauma from my childhood?"

CHAPTER 44

Sarah felt disoriented as she searched for a parking place near Carla's office. Circling the block for the third time, she double parked and waited impatiently for a space to be vacated. She'd thought life in Vanderville was chaotic; living in L.A. was a million times worse.

"I'll be late for sure," she fretted, as she struggled out of the Pontiac and hurried past the slow-walking stragglers. At the corner, the fragrance of an outdoor flower market caught her attention and on impulse she purchased one red rose and asked to have it wrapped. "Add some foliage," she suggested and gulped when the saleslady said, "That will cost an extra seventy-five cents."

The elevator door closed in Sarah's face as she rushed into Carla's building and dashed up the stairs two steps at a time. Her heart pounding from the exertion, she collapsed on a waiting room chair. Carla had real chairs in the waiting room, not pillows, or Sarah might have curled up on one and died right there. Digging in her purse, Sarah checked the time and realized she was ten minutes late. What good was therapy; she knew the cause of her stress, yet she still panicked at the thought of being late.

Five minutes later, Carla poked her head out from behind the double doors and said, "Come in, Sarah, sorry to keep you waiting. I had an emergency call."

Inside the therapist's office, Sarah handed Carla the tissue-wrapped rose and said, "No problem, I was late, too."

"What's this for? It's not my birthday."

"It's a small token of appreciation. You are the only person in my life who listens; who encourages me. Oh God, Carla, I feel so awful," Sarah moaned, as she plunked onto a floor cushion and laid her purse next to the pillow in perfect alignment, then exploded with feeling. "I don't know what's the matter with me. One minute I

actually feel happy, and the next I'm filled with despair. I don't belong anywhere. I feel so angry and I'll be damned if I know why. I feel crabby and irritable and if I had anyone to be irritable with, I'd snap their head off. And that's not me."

"What do you mean that's not you?"

"When I was married, once or twice a year I'd be irritable. Bob and the boys would have a fit. They could be irritable full-time, but I had to make nice all the time."

"Have you been making nice to someone you'd rather not be nice to?"

"Well, yes and no. I know Gloria is your patient, too, so I feel guilty complaining about her, but damn it, she gets on my nerves. She's got an answer for everything and she has to be right. Now that I answer back, she doesn't like it. I told her a good memory I had about my father and she said, 'You're still deeply attached to your father. Why don't you just let it go?' She plays therapist with me and I resent it.

"And Shirley, you know, my neighbor Shirl, I gave her compassion and caring when she had her abortion, and all she gives me are digs. One minute she's flattering me, and the next she makes a crack about the way I dress. She was always at me about Ralph. Now that he's out of my life, she still finds something about my behavior she dislikes. I give and give and all I ever get are kicks. I'm fed up! In the past I never argued with my friends — men or women — now I can't get along with anyone."

"Why do you think you have problems with intimacy?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be sitting here."

"This is just a guess, Sarah, but are you feeling conflicted about a decision?"

Sarah looked at her hands, and said in a low voice, "Yes."

"What's the conflict?"

"I want to write a novel based on my father's life and death and the thought of it terrifies me. What the hell do I know about writing a novel? I'll answer my own question; nothing. I want to write this book more than I want to breathe, and I'm too scared to even try."

“You’ve told me how frightened you were when you left Bob, but that didn’t keep you from driving alone across the country. From what you’ve shared with me, when you know something is right for you, you do it.”

Sarah’s shoulders stretched back, her head held high as she looked Carla in the eye and said with defiance, “I *will* write a novel, and my father will be the main character. Writing and painting come from the same creative source. I’ll use words rather than paint. Colorful words. This summer I’ll spend another week at the Santa Barbara Writer’s Conference — no telling what I’ll learn about novel writing. I’ll find the money.”

“You sound empowered, full of determination, and that’s good. You also look as if you’re coming apart at the seams. Take a deep breath and relax.”

“Relax? Take a deep breath? I haven’t been able to take a deep breath in my entire life. I chatter on a mile-a-minute. I probably use all my breath talking. Talking. Talking.”

“What’s wrong with talking? Creative people are often articulate. They have a lot to communicate. Were you ever criticized for talking too much?”

“I sure as hell was. It started with Grandma. She’d say, ‘Here’s a cookie. Stuff your mouth and stop chattering.’ Then there was my mother’s constant reminder, ‘Think before you speak.’ I do the opposite of whatever she advised. To stay sane, I talk and talk—without thinking.”

“I have a healthier homily for you. Feel before you speak. What are you feeling right now?”

“Scared.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“That I don’t have the brains to write a novel. That I’ll just waste my time, make a fool of myself, and have nothing to show for my effort. But I’m determined. I will write the book, even though the thought scares me shitless. Scared shitless? No wonder I’m constipated,” Sarah laughed.

“If you write the way you talk, you’ll have a best seller. You’re honest and funny. You turn your insights into humor.”

“I thought you’d give me hell for making a funny instead of feeling.”

“You can do both. Writing will help you process your feelings about your father and yourself. Writing will give you a positive format for your anger.”

A reluctant smile crisscrossed Sarah’s lips and, feeling calmer, her voice lost its intensity. “My pain won’t be wasted if I write. Sons are supposed to vindicate their father’s name. My father only had me, so I’m the one who will redeem his reputation.”

“You are a talented woman, Sarah, and resourceful, too. If you want to write a novel, you’ll find a way. You have the courage. You come in here week after week and face your problems head-on. You’ll have the courage to face your father’s life and death.”

“Courage? I do what I have to. I have no choice. I can’t unlearn what I’ve learned. Sometimes I wish I’d stayed in denial or died in the hospital. Growth is so damn painful.”

“Yes, it is, but you do have a choice. You’ve chosen this path to self-knowledge. Look at your progress and congratulate yourself. Don’t pick on yourself for the changes that haven’t yet occurred. Healing is a process.”

“Will I live long enough to complete it?”

“I don’t know about completion. I do know that we choose continued growth, or stagnation. You are growing by leaps and bounds, whether you realize it or not. Right now, I think there is something you want to talk about besides your book. What is it?”

“Right again. I avoid what I fear.”

“That’s natural. What are you afraid of?”

Sarah stood, stretched and changed pillows. Once again settled, with her back against the wall, she said, “Remember after hypnosis I told you how terrified I felt when my mother stuffed me in that locker? Oh, God, I just remembered what she said, ‘If you don’t stop crying, I’ll lock you up and throw away the key.’”

“Damn her. How can I ever forgive her when I keep remembering the cruel, hateful things she did to me? So she was mentally ill. I’m still the one who suffered her abuse. Oh shit, this isn’t what I want to talk about.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“The farmer. When he kicked my blocks, I felt as terrified as I did when my mother locked me up, and that doesn’t make sense. Kicking my blocks is hardly equal to being locked up in a filthy basement. When the twins were frightened by a nightmare, I’d say, ‘I understand, a farmer kicked my blocks.’ They’d look at me like I was crazy. Maybe I am.”

“You are definitely not crazy. Perhaps there is something more to your fear of that farmer. Do you want to try hypnosis again so you can find out?”

Sarah shuddered, looked at her hands balled into fists in her lap, and said “yes” in a little girl’s voice. She stood, walked toward the mattress this time, then hesitated, turned back to Carla and asked, “Do we have time for this?”

“Have you changed your mind?”

“No. I just know intuitively that I may discover something I won’t be able to handle in the next thirty minutes.”

“Don’t worry about the time. My next appointment canceled, so if we need more time, we have it.”

“Good,” Sarah mumbled, as she laid flat on her back, her arms and legs as stiff and rigid as if she were in her own casket.

She blinked repeatedly as Carla moved toward her and said, “We won’t need the metronome today. You’re a good subject for hypnosis. I want you to close your eyes and try to relax. I’ll count down from ten and by the time I reach one, you will be in a deep trance.”

Sarah closed her eyes and pressed her body into the mattress feeling anything but relaxed as Carla said in a soothing voice, “Ten. Nine. You are deep into relaxation. Eight, seven, deeper, deeper . . . One.

“Nod your head if you can hear me, Sarah.”

Sarah’s chin moved as she nodded, but her body remained motionless.

“Sarah, bend your left arm and raise your hand.”

Slowly Sarah bent her left arm and her hand hung limp; her wrist, suspended in mid-air, looked as if it were hung by a thread from the ceiling.

“Sarah, you are in a deep trance, you may lower your arm. You will hear my questions clearly and respond by nodding your head or speaking. Do you understand?”

Sarah nodded.

“You are four years old. Who do you play with?”

A smile crossed Sarah’s lips as she lisped like a four-year-old. “Me plazes wis Hunky Dorie.” Then she twisted her neck and whispered, “Mommy’s mads wis me,” and made a spitting sound with her lips.

“What’s in your mouth?”

“Zoap,” Sarah lisped as she panted and whined, “No, no Mommy, me’s not a bad girl.”

“Use your mother’s voice, Sarah and tell me what she answered.”

“Sarah Mindel, you are a BAD GIRL. Only bad girls use bad words. NEVER SAY HUNKIE AGAIN. YOU DESERVE TO HAVE YOUR MOUTH WASHED OUT WITH SOAP. How would you like it if Dorie called you ‘hunkie?’ You’re Hungarian, too.”

Sarah squirmed on the mattress and Carla asked, “Are you a bad girl, Sarah?”

Her lower lip jutted forward, her eyelids and forehead wrinkled as she muttered, “Me’s a bad girl. A baddddd, bad girl. Noboiez likez me.”

“Who doesn’t like you, Sarah?”

“Dorie. She say, ‘Me name HUNKIE DORIE, DON’T CALL MEZ DORIE!’”

“Is Hunkie Dorie still mad at you?”

Sarah giggled, “No mam. Wez playeded in mud.”

“Was Mommy mad at you?”

Sarah flinched as if she'd been hit and said, "Me's a bad, bad girl. Mommy yelled, 'BAD GIRL. BAD, BAD GIRL. MUD ALL OVER YOU. BAD GIRL!'"

"Me's a bad girl," Sarah whimpered and scrunched her closed eyes into her cheeks.

"Who else called you a bad girl?"

"Mr. Farmer."

"Are you on a farm now, Sarah?"

"Farm," Sarah giggled. "Chickies and duckies and cowies and doggies. Bow-wow, cluck-cluck."

"How old are you?"

Sarah held up three fingers and said proudly, "Me three-and-a half, goings on four."

"Who do you play with?"

"Mr. Farmer," Sarah's shoulders bounced up and down as she giggled, "Giddy-up. Giddy-up."

"What are you playing?"

Sarah's head bopped up and down as she giggled, "Giddy-up."

"Do you mean Mr. Farmer put your legs around his neck and galloped around the barnyard?"

"Yes," Sarah giggled. "Mr. Farmer plays horsie. Giddy-up. Giddy-up."

"Do you obey Mr. Farmer?"

"Yesum."

"Who told you to obey?"

"Mommy."

"Sarah, tell me in your mother's words what she said."

"I have to go to work every day so I can't take care of you, Sarah, but you'll like the farm. You *must* obey the grown-ups. You do everything Mr. and Mrs. Carlson tell you to do. You *must* be a good girl. I want a good report when I visit you next week."

“Sarah, did the farmer kick your blocks?”

Sarah’s chin touched her chest and her lower lip curled in a downward grimace as she whimpered, “Me’s a bad girl.” Tears slid down her cheeks. She sobbed and whimpered as she rubbed her forehead as if she were in pain.

“What’s wrong with your forehead?”

Sarah looked like a turtle as her neck shrunk into her shoulders and she whimpered, “Blockzy hittes me.” Her forefinger touched a spot on her forehead and she whispered, “Rights here.”

“Sarah, move into the position you were in when the block hit you.”

Sarah sat up on the mattress, her eyes still closed, her legs spread wide apart and straight out, the way a child sits. She repeated, “Shoe, ankle, leg, knee, leg,” over and over again.

“Why are you repeating those words, Sarah?”

“Mommy tautzis me. She say, ‘This is your shoe. This is your ankle. This is your leg. This is your knee. This is your leg.’”

“Where is the farmer?”

Sarah scrunched up her shoulders and whimpered, “Me smell doo-doo.” Her nose wrinkled as if she were smelling something vile and her complexion turned ashen as she clamped her mouth shut. Tears cascaded down her cheeks and she covered her eyes with her hand, twisted her neck and repeated, “Shoe, ankle, leg, knee, leg.”

“SARAH MINDEL! CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

Sarah stopped whimpering and Carla said, “I want you to remember living on that farm when you are awake. I want you to remember everything that happened when the farmer kicked your blocks. I will count down from ten, snap my fingers, and you will awake feeling refreshed and alert. Ten, nine . . .” Snap!

Sarah opened her eyes and stared at the wall. She crossed her arms over her breast and rocked back and forth without speaking.

“Where are you, Sarah?”

“Somewhere between a farm and this room,” Sarah answered in a monotone without looking at Carla.

“How do you feel?”

“Terrible, terrible.”

“Lay back down on the mattress, Sarah. When I snap my fingers, you will return to deep relaxation.” SNAP!

“Sarah Shallot, how old are you right now?”

“Forty-nine.”

“Did young Sarah remember something so painful she’s afraid to talk about it?”

“Yes.”

“Were you told to keep it a secret?”

“Yes.”

“Sarah, you have permission to tell me what little Sarah remembered. When I snap my fingers, you will awaken feeling refreshed and alert.” SNAP!

Sarah opened her eyes, blinked repeatedly and looked as if she had awakened from a nightmare. She slid her stocking feet over the side of the mattress and they rested on the floor while her upper body remained motionless.

“How do you feel?”

“I feel as if I’ve found the missing piece of a puzzle and the sharp edge has cut me. I feel like I’m bleeding to death.”

“Do you remember my giving you permission to tell me what you remembered?”

“Yes.”

“Do you feel strong enough to sit up? Lean your back against the wall and tell me what you remembered.”

Sarah obeyed and sat silently staring at her feet. She covered her mouth with one hand and tears poured down her cheeks.

“This memory has been very traumatic. Is there some reason you can’t tell me what happened?”

“The farmer said he’d kill me if I told. I’m going to throw up.” Sarah groaned as she jumped from the mattress and rushed to the wastebasket. She gagged into the basket, retched and reached for the tissue Carla offered, whimpering, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m so embarrassed.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Sarah slumped to the carpet, curled herself in a ball and sobbed, oblivious to Carla as she moaned and wailed, snot dripping to her chin as she writhed in agony. At last she reached for the tissue box, blew her nose, and sat up. “I’m ready now, Carla.”

“First I want to give you a big hug. You are a very courageous woman. I want you to know you have my support and understanding, no matter what you reveal to me.”

Carla knelt on the rug and cradled Sarah in her arms. She rocked Sarah back and forth murmuring, “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Sarah allowed herself to be comforted for a few minutes, then pulled away saying, “I’m okay now. I’ll explain.” She scooted an arm’s length from Carla and wrapped her arms around her stomach. She rocked silently for a few moments and then took a very deep breath. The first really deep breath she’d taken since she was three. “I’ll tell you, Carla,” she said, “but first I’d like to go to the john and wash my face and hands. I feel so dirty.”

On her return, Sarah settled down and said clearly, “Carla, my mother and father were separated when I was three. My mother boarded me on a farm. I don’t remember her dropping me off, but I do remember her visiting me once or twice. She brought me gifts; a set of china that stayed at the bottom of the closet—I never played with it after she left without saying good-bye. On one visit, she brought me a wooden box filled with wooden blocks. I played with those blocks for hours. I turned them over and over, inspecting the colored pictures and letters on all four sides. One summer evening—it must have been summer because my legs were bare, my dress was flimsy, and I had on panties but no undershirt — I knelt on the carpet, a thread-bare imitation Persian rug, and tried to build the blocks into a pyramid. The blocks kept tumbling over, so I moved

and knelt at the edge of the rug and laid out four blocks side by side on the wooden floor. Cautiously I placed and centered three blocks on top of the four. Two blocks on the three, one block on the top with perfect precision. I felt a moment of exhilaration and pride in my accomplishment when the front door jerked open and smacked my blocks to the floor. I cried.

“The next thing I remember the farmer was standing over me shouting, ‘YOU DAMN BRAT! SNIFFLING OVER BLOCKS! I’LL GIVE YOU SOMETHING TO CRY FOR!’ He looked like the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk, and his eyes were black with hatred. Terrified, I scooted backward on my hands and knees away from him. My hands and knees smarted from rug burns as the farmer kicked my blocks with his mucky boot. The blocks flew in all directions and the corner of one hit my forehead and I fell backward, blood dripping into my eye. Before I could touch my face, the farmer knelt over me. Even kneeling he looked like a giant. He was on my left side and I could smell the manure on his boots. Shit was smeared all over the sides.” Sarah’s face distorted in a combination of terror and disgust as she twisted her wrists back and forth, her fingers as rigid as two knitting needles.

“Sarah, take a deep breath.”

“I can’t. Damn it, I can’t.”

“Do you want to stop for today?”

“No. I’ve got to tell you or I’m going to die of shame and no one will know why.” Sarah jerked her neck to one side, blinked repeatedly and then continued. “That farmer knelt on the floor beside me, grabbed both my wrists in one hand and jerked me up to a sitting position.” She shuddered and wiggled her wrists, tears sparkling at the corners of her eyes as she massaged her left wrist with her right hand saying, “It hurt. The more I tried to pull away, the tighter he gripped. He shoved his face into mine and I reeled back from his whiskeyed breath and twisted my neck and face as far from his as I could. ‘HOLD STILL YOU DAMN BRAT!’ he shouted and I held my breath, but obeyed. ‘SNIFFLING OVER YOUR DAMN BLOCKS,’ he shouted in my ear, ‘YOU

WANT TO PLAY WITH SOMETHING HARD? I'LL GIVE YOU SOMETHING HARD TO PLAY WITH!'

"The farmer had on blue overalls with a flap over his genitalia and he held my wrists in a tight grip with one hand while he felt around his crotch and pulled out his penis. I remember the black dirt that shadowed his fingernails as he spit saliva into his callused palm and massaged his prick. I thought he had a snake in his hand." Sarah covered her face with her hands and then rubbed the corner of one eye, her face a mask of shame and despair as she whispered so softly that Carla had to lean forward to hear.

"He . . . He pushed that snake at my face and I froze, afraid to move. He rubbed that prick back and forth across my lips while he shoved my hands under my dress and pushed my hands back and forth against the private parts my mother had forbidden me to touch."

Sarah sniffled, adding, "When my mother gave me a bath, she would scrub me every place but there. She'd hand me a wash cloth, turn her back to me and say, 'Wash yourself. The only time you can touch yourself down there is when you take a bath.' I thought something bad must reside between my legs, so when the farmer pushed my hands between my legs, I knew it must be bad and I kicked and tried to scream, but his prick hardened against my mouth and I gagged, feeling dirty and very, very bad.

"'YOU LITTLE SHIT! HOLD STILL!' the farmer commanded, as he hunched back on his heels and massaged his prick with his free hand. Trained to obey, I stopped moving and watched in horror as he moved the skin on his prick back and forth." Sarah gagged, covered her mouth, took a shallow breath, and continued. "Now I know he was masturbating. His bent arm moved back and forth like a rod on a steam engine. I remember his gritted teeth, his lips curled under, his eyes scrunched closed as he came. I can't describe the absolute horror I felt. When his sperm gushed out I thought the snake was spitting raw egg on my face. Now I know why I had nightmares about snakes all during my childhood. I hate soft boiled eggs to this day. His come splashed across my face and he dropped my wrists, but I was still unable to move or make a sound. I think I

stopped breathing as I covered my face with my hand and peeped out between my fingers and stared at my shoes, the soil and dirt ground into my high tops, only the fringe of a lace topped anklet poking out the top of one. In my head I repeated, shoe, ankle, leg, knee, leg.

“In the background I heard the farmer’s wife shout, ‘What the hell is going on in here? I can hear you two all the way out in the barnyard.’ I kept my hands over my eyes, twisted my neck to the sound of her voice and watched through my fingers as the farmer’s wife tugged at her husband’s shirt and screamed, ‘BASTARD!’

“The farmer’s thing was limp and dangling, but his arm looked like a baseball bat as he pulled his wife’s hand from his sleeve, leaped to his feet and shoved her hard across the room. She thumped against the far wall and slid to the floor. My fingers felt sticky and smelled terrible, but I kept my hands glued across my closed eyes and repeated over and over again, shoe, ankle, leg, knee, leg. Shoe, ankle . . .

“The farmer, in a black rage, continued to shout and I peeped through my fingers in time to see him kick his wife in the stomach with his brown, shitty boots. He turned on his heel and shouted over his shoulder, ‘YOU’RE A FAT PIG. WHO IN GOD’S NAME WOULD WANT YOU!’ and slammed out the front door.

“The farmer’s wife slumped on the floor, her dress pulled to the top of her fat thighs, her soiled apron covered with shit and dried blood. I don’t know how long she sat there, or how long I kept my hands over my eyes repeating shoe, ankle, leg, knee, leg.

“The next thing I remember, the farmer’s wife was kneeling over me. One of her eyes was puffed and swollen, already discolored. She murmured over me saying, ‘Honey, breathe, breathe. Your lips are turning blue.’ Then she picked me up in her arms and carried me into my bedroom. One of those antique gray-black charcoal drawings hung on the wall in a large, gilded frame; the woman’s mouth, a tight line, her eyes glared at me as I sat at the edge of the bed. I turned my attention back to Mrs. Farmer. She was standing beside the carved wooden dresser, pouring water from a white porcelain pitcher into a matching bowl. She wet a cloth, wrung it and then washed my

face and hands. I didn't even flinch from the ice-cold water. I couldn't feel anything. Yes, I did feel something; the gentleness of her hands as she wiped that cloth across my forehead and hair.

"I remember she bandaged my forehead. She tore strips of adhesive tape and criss-crossed the gauze on my forehead. Then she carried me back into the living room. There was shit, blood, and dried semen on the rug and I closed my eyes tight as she sat in the rocker with me on her lap. She was a big woman with enormous breasts and I remember how soft they felt as she cradled me in her arms and rocked me back and forth, back and forth. I don't know how long we rocked, but the whole time she murmured in a low voice, 'He's a good man. Remember, he's a good man. You'll forget the rest. He's a good man, he just had too much to drink. He'll be back. He'll be sorry. You'll see. He'll make it up to you. He'll carry you piggy-back.' I could feel her tears on my hair as she repeated over and over, 'He'll be sorry. I'm so sorry. You're a little girl. You'll forget.'"

Sarah's eyes were huge question marks. "Could this horror story be true? Or do I really have an overactive imagination?"

"Believe me, Sarah, what you've told me is the truth. Think of the details you've remembered. I witnessed your terror. After you threw up, you wailed like a terrified child; rolled up and whimpering."

"But if it's true, why didn't I remember?"

"The mind protects itself by forgetting what is too unbearable to remember. You repressed the trauma of your sexual abuse all these years until you felt strong enough to remember them in a safe place. I'll bet my office is the only safe environment you've had in your entire life. Your childhood was a perpetual air-raid. You never knew when the next bomb would drop.

"A three-year-old doesn't have the vocabulary to articulate what happened. Even if you had tried expressing yourself to your mother, do you think she would have believed you? Even as a child you knew your mother didn't represent safety. It was your

mother who locked you up time and time again and beat you. So you locked this trauma away. I'm sure your little girl has more memories locked away and they'll surface when you're ready. We can't unlock everything at once. So we'll stop for today. This week I want you to write down any memories that surface. If you're in too much pain to handle it by yourself, I want you to call me. Call me as often as you need to. Write down any dreams you have, too. Do you think you can manage to get home on your own?"

Sarah looked like she'd seen a ghost, and in a way she had. She mumbled a thank you to Carla, but seemed unable to move. "It's like a bad dream, and I can't seem to wake up. I can't assimilate this. It's as if I were talking to you about someone else. No wonder I've felt dead from the neck down. I disowned my body, hated my body from the time I was three years old. I've hated myself, felt bad and dirty — full of shame — no matter what good things happened in my life. I know I have to leave, but I have one more question. Why did I keep repeating shoe, ankle . . . those words that became a ritual? Before I left for school in the morning, I would check out my shoes, my ankles, and repeat those words, why?"

"Prisoners in solitary confinement will find a statement that gives them a grip on reality and repeat and repeat that phrase. Your shoes, ankles, and legs were your grip on reality. You knew they existed and you repeated them over and over to stay sane in an insane situation. Later you ritualized those words and used them when you felt threatened, without ever remembering why."

Sarah nodded, then glanced at the wall clock. "I've been here almost two-and-a-half hours! How much do I owe you, Carla?"

"Nothing. The extra time is my gift to you. Go home now, Sarah and rest. Be gentle with yourself."

As Sarah opened the first of the double doors, she turned back to thank Carla once more and spun into her shoulder. The therapist wrapped her arms around Sarah and she allowed herself to be held and comforted for at least a second before she repeated, "Thank you," pulled away, and left the office.

In the hall, Sarah punched the elevator down button and then cramping stomach pains forced her to rush down the hall to the bathroom. In the stall, without time to lay down a cover of toilet paper, she doubled over on the seat, grunting, perspiring, giving birth to the worst diarrhea she had ever experienced. Between excruciating cramps, she flushed the toilet and leaned over it, gagging and retching until dry heaves shook her body. Back and forth, on and off the toilet and above it, she purged her body, then, slumped over the toilet, she sobbed and felt grateful no one else had entered the two-stalled bathroom.

Pale and exhausted, she pulled her panties up from her knees and discovered there were brown stains and lumps across the inside. She removed her jeans and panties, wrapped the panties in toilet paper, and pushed them into the metal Kotex container. Then she pulled her jeans over her bare bottom and the soft material clung to her thighs.

On the way home she stopped at the grocery store. Feeling indecent without the protection of panties, she persisted in purchasing bread, milk, and a few other supplies. Home at last, she locked the door behind her, pulled down every shade in the apartment, and called in sick. “I have the flu. I won’t be in to work for a few days.” Then she removed the phone from its hook and covered the noisy buzz of reminder, ‘phone off hook’ with a pillow.

She stripped off her jeans and blouse, scrubbed herself raw in the shower, and retreated to bed.

That evening, she took another shower and another the next morning, as if repeated scrubbing could cleanse her soul. For three days Sarah subsisted on cheese and crackers, showers, and alternately talking into and then listening to her recorded words on her tape recorder. She vowed not to leave her apartment or talk to anyone until she remembered every sordid detail; or died in the attempt.

In bed, propped up on pillows, Sarah switched on the tape recorder and listened to a little girl cry out in agony. “He hurted me.” The revelations revealed in the voice of a three-year-old were so painful Sarah punched the “Erase Tape” button. She never wanted

to hear that again as long as she lived. And she wasn't sure how long she would live, for she fully intended to end her life if she couldn't deal with the knowledge she had repressed for forty-six years.

She touched the truth gingerly, then pulled back and screamed silently into her pillow. Back and forth between truth and denial until she knew, she knew with absolute certainty that she had been sexually molested when she was three-and-a-half years old. Every inch of her body screamed until her mind accepted, "Yes, it's true."

Sarah lost five pounds in three days, but she made the decision to live, and by the time she entered Carla's office the following Tuesday, she was prepared to reveal her discoveries.

She settled on a cushion, without her usual wiggling to find a comfortable position. She leaned her back against the wall and sat silently waiting for Carla to begin.

"There's a new calmness about you. Tell me about your week, Sarah."

"I was in incredible pain, but I took the time to feel and process. I was sick to my stomach most of the time, and I cried and wailed and felt what it must have been like for that defenseless little girl who was me. I comforted her by promising that if anyone EVER tried to hurt her again, I'd kill to protect her. I always thought it was terrible when someone said, 'I could kill that bastard.' Now I know I'm human, I too have the capacity to kill.

"My subconscious worked overtime all week. I remember clearly that bastard masturbating on me, beating up his wife, and it wasn't the first time, either. I remembered lying in bed at night, terrified he'd come into my room. I remember him fondling me, saying, 'Lick my ice cream cone, Sarah. You know you like it.'"

Sarah's nose wrinkled as if she smelled something foul and her lips quivered as she said, "He'd whisper, 'Shush, you'll wake the Mrs.,' and push my head down hard until my lips touched his penis. I'd twist my neck back and forth, gag and feel sick to my stomach, but I never made a sound. He'd tiptoe out of my bedroom and I'd suck on the

candy he'd given me, then cry myself to sleep." Sarah rubbed the back of her neck, the look on her face revealed the excruciating pain she'd once experienced.

"I HOPE THAT BASTARD IS ROASTING IN HELL! The unspeakable things that miserable man did to me. I remember he forced me to milk the cow. He held my hand to the udder. I hated the touch of that udder, and when I shuddered and pulled back, I fell off the three-legged stool and he picked me up out of the hay, laughing like a hyena. He forced me to touch the dog's private part and now I know why if I pet a dog and my fingers accidentally touch. . . . Oh shit! Carla, I feel so soiled, so unclean, so awful. I can't stand this. I'm sorry I ever started therapy. I was better off before. Now I'm in more pain than the first time I entered your office." Sarah held her hands over her face and sobbed uncontrollably.

At last she looked up, blew her nose, wiped her face with another tissue, then said in a tired voice, "I'm ready to continue."

"I admire you so much, Sarah. What guts you have, what courage, but you're so hard on yourself. You want to resolve this problem in a week when most victims of sexual abuse need years to work out their problems."

"I don't have the time. I'll be fifty years old on my next birthday. I want to live before I die and this battle I'm waging is like a living death. So, I'll continue on this path of discovery or die trying."

"Okay, what else do you remember?"

"I've said shoe, ankle, leg for as far back as I can remember and now I know why. Now I know why I've had tics. Why I blink my eyes repeatedly when I'm nervous. Why I cough, shrug my shoulders, twist my neck. I fought with that bastard and those were my motions when he attacked me. My little girl tried to tell me for years with those ritualistic movements, but I couldn't hear her. My tics began after my father beat me. I must have been as terrified of him as I was of the farmer, only then I didn't remember the farmer. I just lay still and passive, allowing my father to spank me. That little girl in me tried to tell me with her ritual movements and repeated words. She tried to tell me when

I've allowed men to touch me these last few years, but I couldn't hear. I felt dirty and soiled from the time I was three. It didn't make any difference if I went to bed or didn't go to bed with another man.

"This week I discovered I have a body and no one, NO ONE, will ever touch it again without my permission. But I still hate my body. I shower and shower. I scrub and scrub. I don't think I'll ever feel clean. If I touch my genitals, even to wash, I feel ashamed. I won't even soak in the bathtub anymore because I don't want to see my body. I hate myself. I hate my body. Last week, when I left your office, I spent an hour in the bathroom before I could leave the building. I alternated between sitting on the toilet and vomiting into it."

"Your body purged itself of the evil you'd remembered. You've told me your mother gave you enema's at the slightest provocation. Forcing a tube into your rectum is a form of sexual abuse, too. You've told me your father was never around when your mother beat you. I'll make a bet she was sexually frustrated and released her sexual energy by beating you. So you see, Sarah, your feeling that you were a bad girl began with the farmer, but your mother and father's treatment of you compounded the bad feelings you had about yourself."

"Intellectually I understand what you're saying, Carla, but emotionally I still feel soiled and unclean. If only I hadn't been playing with my blocks near the front door."

"All victims of abuse blame themselves. They blame themselves for being victims. If it hadn't been your blocks, it would have been something else. The man was out of control; you were an object for him to abuse. Be angry at that despicable farmer, not at yourself. He seduced you with candy and kindness, then he raped you at his convenience. Every child has the right to be loved unconditionally, to be protected by caregivers. Your caregivers abused you. The farmer stole your innocence, your childhood. Now you have to reclaim your life."

"I'm so angry I think my skin will peel off. Damn that fuckin' bastard."

“Anger is a good sign. You’ll heal when you work through your memories and the feelings they provoke.”

“Last week I thought I’d get to the bottom of this or jump out the window. Shit, Carla, I live on the ground floor; it wouldn’t have been much of a jump.”

“You joke to avoid further discussion of the farmer. You try to entertain me rather than face the ordeal of your memories. Defenses serve a purpose. They protect us from the feelings we’re not ready to accept.”

“I guess I do break my tension with wise-cracks. I screwed up my divorce settlement by doing that. Remember? I told you about wanting the money after I was dead. I wish I were dead, then I wouldn’t have to worry about this; money or anything else.”

“You’re learning what it means to be human,” Carla said. “Now you know you can have violent thoughts without doing violence. Now you know what real anger feels like. Now you know you can relive emotional pain and survive. Believe me, you will heal.”

“It is only when you fully re-experience old pain that you can finally let it go. When you allow yourself to experience buried feelings you allow yourself to feel joy as well as pain. You’ve walked through most of your life stuffing, repressing, and burying your feelings until you were unable to know what you felt. You numbed out when the situation was intolerable. Only great physical pain captured your attention; the rest of the time you’ve been unaware you’ve had a body and had choices about the way you used it. You’ve accepted emotional and physical abuse as an adult without being aware you had a right to stop it. You’ve huddled in the doorway of life as you once huddled in the school doorway at recess, afraid if you played and got dirty or fell and soiled your dress, your mother would beat you.”

“I’m feeling now, alright. I’m locked in pain. I remember that farm house so clearly. I remember the Humpty-Dumpty pattern on the bedroom curtains, the way the sun streaked across the coverlet. The sound of the rooster crowing in the morning. And I

remember the nights I laid in bed with the covers over my face to block out the squeaky mattress sounds coming from the farmer's bedroom. I thought he was beating his wife again. I hated that sound and the yelps and groans. Now I know he was fucking her — yes, fucking her — that bastard wouldn't know how to make love.

“Now I understand why I'd have a fit if our mattress squeaked when the twins were within ear-shot. I always felt nauseated and sick to my stomach when I heard a mattress squeak. Once my father came from Chicago to visit my mother and me in California. We lived in a trailer. I remember hiding under the covers with my hands over my ears when I heard those “yencsing” sounds.”

“Does “yencsing” mean intercourse?”

“Yes. It's a word my father used. It might be Yiddish. I feel sick to my stomach when I even say the word out loud. I can't stand this. I can't handle anymore today.” Sarah said as she shuddered and jumped to her feet.

“Sarah, you're quite special. Most people with your background never amount to anything as adults.”

“What have I amounted to? Almost fifty years old and crying like a three-year-old.”

“With all the physical, sexual, emotional abuse you've experienced, you're still sane. That alone is an accomplishment. Without your art, you might have gone stark raving mad. Be kind to yourself, Sarah. You've already experienced the worst of life; now you deserve the best that life has to offer. You *always* deserved that.”

CHAPTER 45

Sarah sat cross-legged on the carpeted studio floor and flipped pages of her portfolio. Investigating slides and prints of ten years of documented work from a new perspective, she now understood the imagery. The same symbols appeared over and over; baby-doll heads with sad expressions on their china faces, no bodies beneath their ruffled collars; high-top baby shoes; blocks.

She gasped as she viewed a photo collage that included a large, ample woman with her long hair askew. The hairpins had fallen like rain drops from Mrs. Farmer's bun when her husband smacked her against the living room wall.

Sarah covered her face with her hands and rocked back and forth, "I always knew." Now she knew why she'd collected farm implements; a butter churn, white and blue spattered blue enameled Graniteware, a metal food grinder, irons from the turn-of-the-century. She'd been trying to jog her memory. Now she understood why, as a child, she'd hated to play "Farmer in the Dell."

The pain had to surface. What Sarah couldn't acknowledge on a conscious level, she'd expressed visually. No wonder strangers gasped in dismay when they viewed her work. How many times she'd heard, "You look so pretty, so sweet. I don't understand how you could create such hideous, ugly art. It is art, isn't it?" Sarah would giggle and reply, "Sure it's ugly; that's what makes it museum quality!"

Slowly Sarah turned another page and stared at a collaged brick fireplace, the flames stagnant in the empty room, and she clearly remembered the farm house. She closed her eyes and visualized the dry sink in the kitchen, the water pump with the wooden handle next to it. The tins that held flour and sugar, the window over the sink that looked out over the barn yard. A door from the kitchen that led to the living room with its itchy, mohair sofa and matching faded brown, overstuffed chair. Off the living

room, two bedrooms, one for the farmer and his wife, the other, at the back of the house, for Sarah.

She remembered a warm breeze ruffling the curtains, the sunlight playing across her light flannel blanket when she awoke to the cock's crow. She was right, it was summer, but the bedroom curtains were sheers; the Humpty Dumpty pattern was on the bed spread.

An image of her mother and grandmother discussing the farm came to her and she imagined their conversation:

"The city is no place for a child in the summer time. I don't want her playing on the sidewalk or the street; she could get hurt. On the farm she'll have plenty of fresh air and it will be good for her."

"I want to take care of her, Elizabeth. I always have."

"She is not your child. She's mine, and I know what's best for her; so stop your nagging. Sarah will leave for the farm as planned."

Good for her health? Like hell it was. The farmer's wife, unable to bear his children, boarded *his* victims. They were collaborators; that farm house was too small for her not to have known what went on. She had to hear him when he left her bed and slunk into Sarah's.

Sarah shuddered and squeezed her eyes until they looked like two wrinkled prunes, her face a distorted mask, as she remembered her fear when she heard the farmer's footsteps outside her bedroom, or the creak of a floor board when he stepped off the imitation Persian rug. It was always dark when he came into her room. She couldn't see his face, or his thing, but she knew he was there by the fetid odor of his perspiration and his whiskeyed breath.

Sarah could feel his hands on her body and she gagged and rushed to the bathroom, retching over the toilet and succumbing to the dry heaves that racked her body. Then she sat on the closed lid holding her face in her hands.

Before she left the bathroom Sarah splashed cold water on her face and washed, then rewashed, her hands. Tense and anxious, but willing to continue the search for her lost childhood, she returned to the studio and, glancing around the room, she mused that there were more toys in this room than she'd ever had on the farm. With her eyes open she could visualize her set of blocks and the cellophane-covered cardboard box with the patterned china tea service. Her few possessions were stacked on the closet floor of her farm bedroom.

In this studio, as in all the other work spaces she'd carved out of bedrooms, there were miniature china tea sets displayed on shelves, and more miniature forks, knives, and spoons than there were in the original set that she'd played with only once.

Sarah settled back down on the carpet and flipped another page of her portfolio. She stared at an eight-by-ten color photo of an acrylic painting she'd created in San Pedro. The image was surreal: a large rooster, its saddle feathers and beak painted flaming red. A brown and white cow, its sad eyes on the same level as the rooster's leg. The picture was out of sync, out of perspective. A cracked egg and a glass of spilt milk completed the subject matter, set against a black background. The painting was weird, off balance, and unlike any other painting Sarah had ever seen or created. Now she understood this allegory.

She remembered the cows on the farm; if she stood very still, they would remain motionless, staring back at her with their soulful eyes. If she stepped away slowly, the cows would turn their large heads and follow her with their eyes. She remembered the cock, his feathers ruffled, his wings flapping as he crowed and flew from the barnyard fence, the barnyard chickens screeching and running in circles to avoid the angry rooster.

She remembered a dilapidated wagon, an old work horse. And a whip . . .

* * *

Legs astride, the farmer stood in the living room whirling a black horse whip over his head. He held the braided horse hair handle tight in his hand as the whip whirled and the tip swung and wrapped around the claw-footed chest. "Do you see how accurate my

aim is?" he boasted. Sarah pushed deeper into the mushy sofa and nodded her head up and down.

Raising the whip overhead again, he whirled it several times, aimed for the chest, but missed, and the loose rug bunched and rippled across the floor. Cursing, he waved the whip under Sarah's nose and threatened, "Don't you EVER disobey me, or this is what you'll get!" With that he hurled the whip across the room and it cracked against the wall.

* * *

Sarah shuddered, remembering her terror when the farmer whispered his threats during the day and into the night. "If you tell ANYONE our secret, I'll kill you; just like I kill chickens."

Reaching for a crumpled pack of cigarettes on the floor beside her, Sarah lit one and watched smoke curl in a stream of sunlight. Now that the door to her repressed memories had been opened, she consciously tried to remember details of life on the farm. The fried cucumbers, dripping with bacon grease, that she was forced to eat for breakfast. The rich butter that Mrs. Farmer allowed her to sample when she finished churning. The yellow lumps of fat in the unpasteurized milk that turned her stomach. The repulsive odor of the outhouse when she skipped past it.

Too small to use the privy, Sarah used the white chamber pot with one handle. It was kept under her bed, out of sight until needed. Sarah remembered the farmer leaning on the door jamb, his odd smile, a cigarette dangling from his lips, his eyes devouring her as she sat on the potty. Sarah remembered her discomfort, how she'd squirmed and lowered her eyes to the floor to avoid his.

Slowly Sarah turned the last page of her portfolio and stared at another eight-by-ten color print. Suddenly her neck tightened and her breathing became strained; there before her was a visual history of her sexual abuse. Stunned, Sarah swallowed hard as she assessed the construction composed of the side of a playpen painted in vivid shades of pink and blue. A quilted pink satin baby blanket had a border Sarah had painted black.

Carefully Sarah removed the print from the protective cover and reached for an oversized magnifying glass. She inspected the print closely and stared at a paper collaged face of a child with a tear on her cheek, spider webs wrapped around her feet and ankles. A woman's teeth were gritted in anger and her eyes scrunched closed like two fists. Body parts were strewn about; a red STOP sign glued in the center. A large hand gripped a woman's wrist. One eye was visible through spread fingers. A hand gun aimed at a three-dimensional phallic symbol, and in the folds of the quilt the title: And when Men Look at Women; and When They . . .

Sarah dragged into the bedroom, flung herself face down on the bed, and sobbed until at last she hunched up to a kneeling position, flailing her arms and repeating, "I've always known. Always." Anger gave her strength and her fisted hands were weapons as she beat the mattress shouting, "THAT BASTARD! BURN IN HELL!" There must be a special hell for child abusers; the perpetrator lashed to a wall, his hands and feet bound as thousands of little naked girls paraded past. If he so much as glanced at one of them, electric shocks would shoot through his body. If he tried to close his eyes to avoid pain, he'd receive quadruple shocks. For all eternity he'd be tormented, as he'd tormented and defiled Sarah and all the little girls before and after her. Carla said sexual abuse was *not* an isolated event — that molesters repeated their behavior with many children.

Sarah ranted and raved. She visualized the farmer chained to the wall so she could spit on him, tear out his eyes, cut off his prick. She felt sick and curled into a fetal position on the bed. She wiped her moist forehead with the corner of her white T-shirt, pushed her damp bangs to one side, and remembered the farmer tickling her.

He'd tickle the soles of Sarah's feet, her waist, and around her small nipples, until whimpering, she'd plead with him to stop. But he'd guffaw and continue torturing Sarah until his wife shouted from the living room, "Stop that. You're exciting her; she'll never get to sleep."

Then he'd stop, wipe Sarah's damp forehead, gently touch her hair, press his lips to her cheek and whisper, "See you later, dearie. Remember, it's our secret."

Later when little Sarah awakened to the farmer's hands fondling her, feeling strange sensations between her legs as he forced her mouth to his thing, she'd feel a mixture of nausea and fear, as he whispered, "If you tell anyone, I'll kill you."

Shudders coursed the length of Sarah's body; her shoulders drew up into her neck and she wondered why she felt terrified. Of course she felt threatened; she'd told the secret. Now the farmer would kill her. Sarah knew her thinking was childish, but still her fear persisted. "This is ridiculous," she said to an empty room. "That sicko doesn't know where I live. Besides, he's probably long dead." Still, she felt fearful; afraid her molester would slither into her room to defile and violate her body.

At her next therapy session, Sarah burst into Carla's office, jabbering before she sat down. "I've been through hell again this week, but I know, I really know deep inside that what I'm remembering is the god-awful truth. I'm so filled with anger; I think I'll explode. Anger's been oozing out of me since last Saturday when I remembered more details. Yesterday I told off a mechanic. I . . ."

"You are looking at one angry woman!" Sarah snarled at the burly mechanic. When she'd talked to him earlier in the day, she'd smiled and asked, "Please, would you look at the car motor? It's making funny noises again." Now, at 4:00 P.M., she was back at the garage deliberately raising her voice and demanding attention, "I want my car fixed. Now!"

The mechanic, built like an ape with long sinewy arms, continued screwing up the car on the hoist above his head. If he heard Sarah, he gave no indication.

"Damn you!" she bellowed, "I picked up my car this morning and you assured me the motor was humming just fine. I drove to Long Beach and the car broke down on the exit. Cars were backed up behind me for a mile. Other drivers were honking, shouting, and swearing at me. I had to walk two miles to a gas station, pay for a tow truck, and YOU . . .!"

“Lady, get your ass out of here!” the mechanic muttered, as he turned the wrench to tighten another screw without looking in her direction.

“No way am I getting out of here, Mister. You fix my car right now! You son-of-a-bitch!”

The mechanic’s eyes remained fixed on the jumble of wires overhead as he mumbled, “It’s your own damn fault, lady. Don’t blame me.”

“No way, buster. It is not my fault. I paid you to fix my car, not wreck it. This is the third time this week I’ve had to bring my car back to you. I’ve paid you and you’ve done absolutely nothing. *This* is your responsibility!”

The mechanic turned and moved menacingly toward Sarah, his wrench suspended in mid-air, an intimidating sneer on his face as he towered above her, waving the wrench and shouting, “Get the hell outa here and stop bothering me!”

Sarah stood her ground without flinching. She didn’t move an inch when he bent over and shoved his fat nose into her face, belched, and snarled, “Get the hell out of here!” The powerful odor of his breath moved Sarah back a step, and in complete exasperation she shouted, “And you drink on the job? No wonder you can’t fix my car. I smell whiskey on your breath, you drunk!”

The beefy mechanic, his eyes hidden under bushy brows, his face and hands smeared with oil and dirt, his pants and shirt stained with grease, actually looked hurt at her words. Over six feet tall, he looked like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He bent over Sarah again, opened his mouth wide and said in a soft voice, “Here, smell my breath. I don’t drink. That’s Listerine you smell.” Sarah stepped back in disbelief as two men, dressed in coveralls like the mechanic, rushed into the garage and shouted at the mechanic, “Calm down jackass!”

“And that’s not the end of the story, Carla. When I left the gas station I sat in my parked car, out in front, and doubled over with laughter. It was glorious. I felt so damn good standing up to that bully. I knew that bastard would never fix my car, but I didn’t

care. I stood up for myself and I felt so proud. For a minute, anyway. Then I stopped laughing and realized that anger hadn't served me any better than smiling and pleasing; my car still wasn't repaired. I knew I'd have to try another tactic.

"When I finally got home, I called Jack. He promised to come over and explain the parts under the hood, and he did. From now on I'll be able to say with authority, 'Fix that carburetor, change those spark plugs, or whatever. And give me an estimate before you start the job.'"

Carla raised her thumb straight up, "Right on," she said. "That's great. Anger worked for you. If you'd tearfully stood in the garage, that fool still wouldn't have repaired your car."

"But I'm angry all the time. Anger spills out of me in all directions. I had another argument with Glo. She tried to control *me* with *her* anger. What's happening to me? Will I be angry forever?"

"That's the first time you've asked for validation since you stepped into the office. For months and months, you came in here and before you even sat down, you asked me to validate some action or decision. This morning you announced your behavior with the mechanic; so, why do you need validation about your disagreement with Gloria?"

"How should I know?" Sarah answered belligerently, then caught herself and apologized. "I'm sorry I spoke to you like that. I'm just crabby. I feel mean and ugly. Nothing pleases me."

"First of all, Sarah, there's not a mean or ugly bone in your body. You're testy and quick-tempered to protect yourself from more pain. I won't be revealing a confidence when I tell you that Gloria protects herself the same way. Voicing our limits and boundaries is healthy and vital to recovery. Anger is another step toward healing."

"You're right. But it's so damn hard. After I raised my voice and demanded to be taken seriously, I had a bellyache. Was it worth it, spouting off? Wasn't I better off

when I numbed out? Now I feel everything. I feel scorched and blistered; the things I'm remembering are obscene and I hate myself."

"Hate the farmer, not yourself. He was the abuser; you were the innocent victim. Think for a minute before you answer. Did that mechanic look anything like the farmer?"

Sarah closed her eyes, twitched and then steadied her right wrist with her left hand. Finally, she spoke in a soft voice and said, "They had the same bushy eyebrows that meet in the middle of the forehead. Both of them were tall and burly, a hunch to their shoulders like a gorilla, pot belly's drooping below their belt line." Sarah shuddered, blinked her eyes, and muttered, "Both of them had torn, filthy fingernails. They both wore keys hooked to a loop on their bib overalls." Sarah's elbows pushed against her waist as she wrung her hands, looked down at her feet, and said with a catch in her throat, "When the farmer masturbated on my face, I could hear his keys jangle with each move of his arm."

Sarah covered her face with her hands and rocked, "I can't stand the sound of jangling keys," she moaned, "or bed springs, or finger's tapping against wood. Oh, God, here I go again, remembering things I'd rather forget."

"If the farmer were standing in front of you now, what would you do? Show me."

Sarah leaped up, a look of hatred on her face, as she tore a bataka from the corner and beat every pillow in the room, except the one Carla sat on. She shouted and screamed, venting outrage, fury, and wrath. "You bastard!" she screamed over and over. "If you were here, I'd tear you apart, I'd smash your balls with a bat and send you into space. I'd pull out your fingernails, one at a time. I'd cut off your prick and stuff it in your mouth and beat on you until you cried for mercy. I'd, I'd . . ."

Her rage spent, for the time being, Sarah crumbled to the floor, her hands balled fists as she vowed, "If I ever saw an adult abuse a child, or if a man tried to rape me, I'd fight him to the death. I'd kick and scream and my adrenaline would be running so fast I'd kill him without batting an eyelash."

“Keep that rage. It’s working for you.”

“But what if I meet another slob like the farmer and kill him? I’d spend the rest of my life in jail.”

“You feel violent, and you have a right to, but I doubt seriously that you could ever kill anyone. If you were a man, you’d be a conscientious objector.”

“You’re probably right, but damn him to hell; I want to torture and kill him for what he did to me.”

CHAPTER 46

Gloria finally called on Saturday afternoon, but refused to acknowledge that her behavior might have been offensive. Like Elizabeth, she insisted on being right—about *everything*.

“Let’s forget it, Glo. I’m under a lot of stress in therapy.”

“Well, so am I. What’s the big deal?”

“I’ve discovered that I was sexually molested at three-and-a-half. I’m trying to work past it, but I feel angry all the time.” Carla had suggested that Sarah put a voice to her experience; it would help in her healing process. “Tell a trusted friend,” she’d said.

“Was there penetration?” Gloria asked.

Aghast at Glo’s response, Sarah snapped back, “Why would you ask me something like that?”

“I hear such wild stories in court, I just wondered what yours was.”

That did it. Sarah blew up. “When and if I calm down, I’ll call you.”

Before Sarah could compose herself, Jack called. His sweet voice offered a cheerful hello, but Sarah shot him down. “You must be between girlfriends if you’re calling me.”

“Call me when you feel better,” Jack responded before he hung up.

A couple of hours later, Keith called. Sarah hadn’t heard from him in a month. She recognized his voice and cut him off in mid-sentence, “I can’t talk now. I’ll call you back. Sometime.” Maybe never, she thought.

Sarah felt alienated from everyone, isolated and alone. Unable to create, she forced herself to concentrate on the work at hand: paying bills at home, or typing invoices at work. At the office, the odor of Horace’s dried perspiration, or the jangle of his keys as he walked past, would trigger a flashback. She’d run to the john, splash cold

water on her face, and calm down before she returned to her desk to type someone else's letters.

Day after day, as soon as she finished work, Sarah searched for answers. Why had she been boarded on a farm? Why hadn't her father visited her? Why hadn't she lived with Grandma? Why hadn't Grandma protected her from her mother?

With the drapes drawn, the doorbell and the phone left unanswered, Sarah wandered from room to room. Sometimes she'd manage to nibble a piece of toast or eat some Jello she'd prepared in the morning. Most evenings all she could manage was a cup of tea. Her weight loss showed in her gaunt features and her baggy jeans. The only consistency in Sarah's behavior was her persistent need to discover more about the missing years of her childhood.

Little by little, memories surfaced and she dealt with the grief and pain as best she could. With Carla's support, each Tuesday, she was able to sort out her unnumbered sorrows.

"Carla, what I don't remember during the day, I dream about at night. Every night I wake up at 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. and can't get back to sleep. I toss and turn, beat the pillows until my arms ache, then I collapse from exhaustion. But have a hell of a time getting out of bed in the morning. What's with me, anyway?"

"When you awake at the same time every night, it's a clue and worth investigating. What time did your father come home from work?"

"Probably between 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. The official closing was 2:00 A.M., but he drank with his customers in the back room after hours."

"Did you hear him when he came home?"

"Most nights I slept through his homecoming and was surprised to find him in bed, beside my mother, when I woke her in the morning. Other nights I'd hear him smack his lips — he told me once that he kissed God goodnight after his prayers."

"Was he religious?"

“That’s the only time I ever heard him mention God, but he valued honesty and integrity.”

“Do you remember anything else?”

Sarah made a face and said, “The nights he came in making a racket, banging his knee on a dining room chair and cursing a blue streak as he stumbled toward the bedroom. Or listening to him gag and vomit in the bathroom when he . . .” her voice trailed off and, filled with revulsion, she changed the subject.

“This week I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about my grandmother. She was so loving and kind. She was the one who rubbed Vicks on my chest and pinned a towel around me when I had a cold. She would tie a piece of garlic on a string around my neck to cure whatever ailed me. She did lots of funny things, like giving me a teaspoon of sugar for my hiccups, or bending my head over the sink while she rubbed my eyelid back and forth and said, ‘Now mine child, spit in the sink and whatever’s in your eye will disappear.’ And it did. She worked Hungarian magic.

“Then my mother would show up and criticize, ‘You and your Hungarian mumbo-jumbo. I’m raising my daughter to be an American. Stop filling her head with your gypsy cures. My remedy (for colds, stomach aches, sore throats, fevers, measles, mumps, and chicken pox) is best. I give her a laxative and that cures what ails her.’

“Yeah, sure! I don’t know if I felt better from Grandma’s hands-on, loving attention, or from her ‘cures,’ but whatever; I did feel much better. On the other hand, if I scraped my knee when my mother was around, she’d raise nine kinds of hell. ‘You’re clumsy, careless. You never watch where you’re going. Stop staring into dreamland and watch your feet! Blah, blah, blah.’ She’d berate me while pouring iodine on the scratch. I’d wince and cry out and she’d have something new to scold about. ‘Hold still. I can’t bandage your knee if you don’t stop wiggling.’ Her rough handling hurt more than the scratch or the iodine.

“When I wet my bed, Grandma consoled me, ‘Never mind, mine child, you’ll outgrow this,’ she’d say. When I wet the bed and my mother had to change the linen,

she'd fuss and fume, 'I'm sick of changing sheets. Why don't you grow up and use the bathroom.' I felt humiliated and embarrassed."

"Did you wet the bed often?"

"Yes. I'd dream that I was sitting on the potty, and then I'd wet my pajama's. You know, the kind with the feet in them and the back seat that dropped down."

"Wetting your bed is another validation of your sexual abuse, Sarah. You told me the farmer used to leer at you when you sat on the potty."

After a moment or two Sarah looked up. "Why did I have to uncover all this? I was better off when I didn't remember."

"There's no way around pain, except through it. With the psychological knowledge we now have, we would be aware that if a child frequently wet the bed, and talked nonstop, there would be a good chance sexual abuse had occurred. In your childhood, if an adult knew anything about psychology— and they rarely did — they'd blame that behavior on Freud's 'penis envy.' I'd make a bet you didn't talk for attention, but for safety."

"As a teenager, sometimes I could talk my father out of a bad mood and save my mother and me from another dinnertime hassle. If I were witty enough, clever enough, I could get him to laugh. If I couldn't, I'd blame myself for his rotten mood and irritability. My mother might say, 'Stop talking and eat your dinner,' or 'Don't talk with your mouth full.' Everyone was always 'shushing' me. My mother would say, 'Hush, your father's sleeping.' Grandma would say, 'Hush, I have work to do.' 'Hush, keep quiet,' the farmer would whisper in the middle of the night. 'Shut up! Do what I say and I'll give you candy.' "

"Sarah, do you remember any time you felt safe?"

* * *

Grandma Etta and three-year-old Sarah sat facing each other across an ice cream parlor table in the South Chicago drugstore while Elizabeth worked behind the counter. Grandma spooned chocolate ice cream into her mouth, teaspoon by teaspoon, while little

Sarah fidgeted on her telephone book and piled vanilla ice cream in one direction, then dragged the back of her spoon across the melting dessert in the opposite direction.

“Stop playing with your ice cream and eat it,” grandma advised.

Sarah held her spoon over her dish by the handle and watched her mother.

Elizabeth spooned cherry concentrate into a tall, fluted glass, curved at the top, then she held the glass under a lever mounted on the counter to add carbonated water. She stirred the contents with a long-handled spoon, added whipping cream and topped the soda with a maraschino cherry. She placed the soda in front of the male customer at the counter, grinned at something he said, and not once looked in her daughter’s direction.

“What are you staring at, Sarah Mindel?” grandma asked. “Either eat your ice cream or put your spoon down. Stop waving it in the air.”

Sarah rested her spoon in the softened ice cream, then brushed her bangs to one side. With her hair off her forehead, grandma noticed the bandage and asked, “Did you fall down?”

Sarah looked at her spoon sinking into the ice cream and removed it. She laid it parallel to her dish while tears dripped down her cheeks, further watering the ice cream.

“Why are you crying?” grandma asked in a worried voice. When she received no response, she asked in a stronger tone, “Have you been a bad girl? Have you been naughty? Are you hiding something from me?”

Sarah’s chin dropped to the top of her dish, her eyes lifted to Grandma’s face as she begged in a pitiful voice, “Grammy, please, please, grandma, take me home with you. Please, please, me no go back to farm.”

Grandma Etta, with a perplexed frown on her face, looked at her pleading granddaughter, and asked, “If I take you home with me, will you promise to be a good girl?”

Sarah slid down from the ice cream parlor chair, the fat phone book left dangling, half on and half off, and rushed to her grandmother’s side. She pressed close and

whispered, “Me be good. Me be good. Me promise.” Her eyes and her voice beseeching, pleading with her grandmother for safety.

* * *

“And she did save me, Carla. She scooped me up in her arms, rushed past my mother, and said with determination, ‘I don’t care what you say. Sarah is coming home with me. She is not going back to that farm.’

“Outside the drug store, with me in her arms, she stopped a split second to catch her breath. Then, panting from exertion—I could hear her heart pound against my cheek—she ran down the sidewalk, ran under the viaduct that separated uptown from home. She didn’t stop running until she’d tucked me in bed for a nap. When I awoke, Grandma cuddled and reassured me, ‘No matter what your mother says, you are staying here mit me.’”

“And did you?”

“A couple of weeks ago I called my cousin Lois, long distance — she still lives in Chicago. We were as close as sisters when we were kids. She spent almost as much time at Grandma’s as I did. She lived next door with Aunt Esther, her mother, and her soft-spoken father, Uncle Morris. Aunt Esther bullied him, too.”

Sarah caught herself. “Here I go again, filling in all the blanks, answering questions you haven’t even asked.”

“Tell me about your conversation with Lois.”

“We hadn’t talked in years. Our lifestyles as married women were so different. Bob, the lawyer, found nothing in common with Lois’s husband, the used car salesman. For that matter, neither did I. Anyway, I could tell from Lois’s tone that she was surprised to hear from me and she remained aloof until we started reminiscing. We laughed about listening to Little Orphan Annie on the radio and mailing away for the coded message. We were both so excited when the letter arrived, addressed to us, but we lost enthusiasm when Lois decoded the message — she’s almost five years older than I

am — and it said, *Drink Ovaltine*. Lois remembered lots of things I didn't, because she's older."

Sarah stopped her chatter as if she'd been slapped, stamped her stocking foot, and groaned, "There I go again. Talk, talk, talk."

"Take a deep breath and relax for a minute. When you're feeling calmer, tell me what upset you."

Sarah pressed her shoulders back against the wall, her head and neck still rigid as she breathed deeply, exhaled, sniffled, and began, "I asked her if she had any memory of the time I was on the farm. She thought for a minute and then told me she remembered me making a fuss in Grandma's kitchen, jumping up and down, stomping my high-top shoes on the linoleum floor, screaming and shouting, 'NO, no! No FARM!' She also said she remembered my Grandmother and mother yelling and grabbing for me, pulling me back and forth between them."

Sarah squeezed her upper arm with a pained expression on her face as Carla asked, "What are you feeling?"

"My arms hurt."

"Our bodies hold memories. Lean back and massage your arms with your eyes closed; tell me what you remember."

Sarah leaned back, crossed her arms over her nipples, and massaged her upper arms. With her eyes closed, she said, "My mother and grandmother were jerking me back and forth between them, their voices strident as they shouted, 'She's going back to the farm!' 'No, she's not!' Grandma gave a hard yank and freed me from my mother's grip. She hid me behind her long black skirt and held me there with one hand. She held her other hand, palm up, in my mother's face and shouted, 'Sarah is not going back to the farm and that's it!' I was peeking around grandma's hip and I saw my mother's expression. She was outraged; no one else had ever dared speak to her like that."

Sarah opened her eyes and looked astonished. "I remember it all, in detail. They argued back and forth, 'She'll do what I tell her! She is my daughter, not yours!'

“Elizabeth, you leeeve in mine house. Oonless you go back mit Bart, Sarah stays mit me. No farm!’

“My mother finally gave in but insisted, ‘Okay, so she stays here, but I am her mother and you will not interfere with the way I discipline her. What I say goes. Even in your house!’

“God, Carla, I feel jerked around, even as I sit here. It’s hard enough remembering my own traumas, let alone someone else’s. How come Lois remembered that incident and I didn’t?”

“From your description, it was quite a scene. Perhaps Lois had never experienced an argument like that before and it impressed her.”

“Lois did tell me that other than that time, she’d never heard Grandma raise her voice. She also said that was the only time she ever saw me have a tantrum.”

Sarah bit her lower lip, twisted her hands in her lap, and said thoughtfully, “Thank God grandma won that argument. She really saved my life. Grandma protected me and I wasn’t even her own flesh and blood. My mother always says, ‘Blood is thicker than water.’ Whatever that means. But without a blood tie, grandma loved me while my own mother was as mean as the wicked stepmother in a fairy tale.”

“Now do you understand why your grandmother didn’t intervene when your mother dragged you down the basement steps?”

“Yes. My mother, the witch, had made a deal with Grandma. But why didn’t one of my aunts or uncles protect me?”

“‘God save the world from the weak ones, they rule it!’ Your mother, the woman who had nervous breakdowns, controlled her family. They gave in to her demands, most of the time, to protect themselves. If she had another breakdown, and that was always an underlying threat, they knew they’d have to take care of her. She used that same unspoken threat to keep you in line. The passive one in a relationship may be as controlling as the one who rants and raves.”

“That’s disgusting. That’s how I behaved with Bob. He’d rave and rant and I’d cry and get my way. I’m a controlling bitch, just like my mother.”

“You are definitely *not* like your mother. I’ve reassured you about that before and I’ll continue to remind you of your worth until you believe it. When you understand what motivates your sometimes inappropriate behavior, you change your conduct. Your mother doesn’t want to give up her denial and change. She could drain the Grand Canyon with her self-righteous behavior. Her need to be right is overpowering and bares no relationship to what is true.

“Unlike your mother, you are kind, thoughtful, and generous. You’re a spirited woman who has suffered for a very long time; through no fault of your own. You are *not* a martyr, like your mother; you’re a survivor. I trust people who are honest with themselves, as you are, and I’m skeptical of anyone who insists they have the right and only answer to life’s multitude of problems.”

Sarah blew hard into a tissue, sniffing repeatedly as she rubbed it back and forth under her nose. Then she wadded it into a ball, her hand fisted over it. “If only I were younger, I’d have more time to enjoy life after I’m healed.”

“Look to the process, not the finish line. Therapy is a process. Each day that we live we can discover and understand more about ourselves and change the behavior that no longer serves us. The skills you learned to survive — determination, persistence, endurance — are strengths that will serve you well in your healing. You’ll get past this calamity of memory and begin to enjoy life again. You need to accept the fact of your abuse, not the shame or guilt. That belongs to the farmer.”

After a skimpy lunch of toast with cream cheese and a cup of weak tea, Sarah chose to walk, rather than bike to work. She left her apartment, aware for the first time in months that the weather was perfect. Her preoccupation with inner work had been so intense, she’d lost touch with her environment. Today, however, she was thrilled to live in California where it felt like spring all the time.

At the corner, a little girl played hide and seek with her shadow and Sarah joined in without saying a word. She walked her shadow across the child's and they locked eyes and grinned. Sarah, smiling for the first time in weeks, nodded an acknowledgment to a handsome black woman who approached.

At the intersection, Sarah observed three men in open-collared work shirts and blue jeans. They stood in a circle, snickering and rolling their eyes as a good looking young woman proceeded past them with her head held high. Sarah heard the shrill macho whistle as the woman stepped off the curb. Her stomach churned. Damn them, she thought, don't they have anything better to do than ogle women? She trotted past the men as quickly as possible, but felt their eyes on her legs, bare beneath her jean skirt, as she stepped off the curb. The piercing sound of their wolf whistles filled Sarah with loathing and fury. Assholes, rolling their eyes and snickering; as if women were "invented" for their sick pleasure. Filthy scum. Men are a different species. They could be spoiled brats, savage animals, or sniveling weaklings; but some damn-fool-woman would love them. A man could be coarse, stupid, mean-hearted and cruel, but if he had "that thing" dangling between his legs, he thought he owned the world. Damn them, they did. They were taller and weighed more, and because of their size, they could rape, ravage, and batter their "better half." Men were all no-good schmucks—well, not the twins. Death was preferable to being any man's victim.

The depth of Sarah's rage staggered her. She wanted to blast every damn one of them. She didn't want another man to touch her heart or her body. She vowed to revirginize. She was so outraged, she walked past her office and didn't even realize it until she reached the next corner.

Sarah continued to grieve over her lost innocence, but slowly, over time, with Carla's support and guidance, she was no longer consumed with guilt and shame. The healing process had begun. Recovery from abuse, of any kind, has predictable stages: denial, acknowledgment, grieving, then acceptance. The steps, however, fluctuate. Sarah

had days of relief when the farmer's assault didn't cross her mind. Then a friend's innocent remark or a sight, sound, or smell triggered a flashback. Now, however, Sarah had the psychological tools to deal with her misery. When something or someone bugged her, she took time-out to discover the source of her discomfort, endured the pain, and then released it.

By the spring of 1979, Sarah had stopped despising men in general, but was definitely not interested in any man in particular. She felt good about herself and her choice of celibacy. She'd reached a comfort zone that allowed her to concentrate on areas of her life that had been neglected for months. She spent long hours in her studio preparing for an invitational show at the County Museum. She'd received her invitation to participate the same day her acceptance to the Santa Barbara's Writer's Conference arrived in the mail. She took this good news as an omen that her luck had changed.

CHAPTER 47

The first Saturday of July, Sarah backed the Pontiac out at 9:00 A.M. on her way to attend the writer's conference. By 10:30 she'd negotiated the Ventura Freeway's bumper-to-bumper traffic and was cruising along Highway 101, the scenic route to Santa Barbara.

With her first view of the Pacific, she rolled down the car window, inhaled fresh salt water air and breathed a sigh of relief. Her mind and body relaxed and she began humming "If They Could See Me Now," while tapping her fingernails on the steering wheel, keeping time to the melody.

Two years ago—the first time Sarah attended the conference—she'd read her work aloud, despite her anxiety. She intended to do the same thing this year, no matter how nervous she felt. She still couldn't spell worth a damn, but that fact no longer intimidated her now that she knew the reason why.

Sarah would complain "I feel so stupid; how can I write a book if I can't spell?" and Carla suggested, "Let me set up an appointment for you at U.C.L.A. to be tested for a learning disability. Many abused children are hindered in their capacity to learn certain skills."

Sarah took the test reluctantly, but it proved conclusively that she had severe dyslexia. Now she understood why she'd had to work harder than her classmates for good grades. It was her phenomenal memory that had saved her from being the child relegated to the corner of the classroom and forced to wear a paper "dunce cap."

It was Sarah's miswired brain and/or the early traumas she'd experienced that caused her to transpose P's and B's, M's and W's—not a lack of intelligence. She still misspelled common words, misdialed phone numbers, and had to think twice before she said, "prescription" or "subscription," even though she knew the difference in their

meaning. After the initial shock of discovering that she had a “kink” in her brain, and after the tears, Sarah no longer felt diminished.

Now, if someone called her Mrs. Malaprop, as Bob had, or told her she was dense because she couldn’t read a map, she laughed and said, “No big deal. I have dyslexia. So did Flaubert, that’s why it took him fifteen years to write *Madame Bovary*.”

Reaching for a fresh pack of cigarettes on the seat beside her, Sarah extracted one, pushed in the lighter, lit up, and took a deep drag; how often she’d done that on the long drive from Vanderville to Los Angeles. Sarah felt light-years removed from the naïve, gullible “child” who drove half way across the country.

Nearing the outskirts of Santa Barbara, Sarah watched for the Miramar sign. Then, lost in thought again, she passed the exit and had to make a U-turn in town. At noon she pulled into the resort, eager to unpack and get settled.

She parked, registered at the front desk, then reparked in front of her assigned room. Half-dragging her luggage inside, Sarah moaned as she lifted one suitcase onto the bed. The suitcase was half filled with books — a dictionary, a thesaurus, a book on grammar and punctuation—and it weighed a ton. She’d also shoved in an oversized pack of typing paper, pens, and tablets with her tennis shoes, jeans, blouses, and cardigan sweater.

After another trip to the car, Sarah hoisted her portable electric typewriter to the round table in front of the window and plugged it in. She unwrapped the typing paper and placed it to the left of the machine. With everything ready for action, she curled up in a comfortable chair with her writing folder on her lap. She’d written so many pages about Bart in the last two years that, rather than pour over them, she opted to reread five pages she’d written the week before having nothing to do with him.

Smiling, Sarah wondered if anyone else would find it humorous *if* she had the nerve to read it aloud. She wondered if Terry, the most popular writer/teacher at the conference, would remember her. After all, it had been two years since he’d seen her.

Steffie arrived, breathless and moaning. “Sarah, the traffic was horrendous. I thought I’d never get here. I thought I’d save time taking the freeways, and here you are already settled in when you drove the long route. How are you, anyway?” she said, as she hugged Sarah. “This week together is going to be even better than last time.”

Sarah helped her roommate lug in her suitcases, small bags, and parcels. When everything was inside, Steffie collapsed across the bed, kicked her feet high, then bounced back up and announced, “Okay, I’m ready. Tell me everything,” and Sarah was caught up in her friend’s boundless enthusiasm.

By late Tuesday afternoon, after a full day of workshops — poetry for Sarah, short-story writing for Stephanie — Sarah was ready to collapse. Not Steffie, she was raring to go, and insisted on a walk. “Come on, don’t be a stick. Fresh air will wake us up.”

Steffie was full of pep without fresh air. She was young enough to be Sarah’s daughter; what did she know about being wiped out! When Sarah was her age she could run circles around her friends, too. But not anymore.

Stephanie refused to take no for an answer, and by the time the roommates had walked across the railroad tracks that separated the resort from the beach, Sarah’s energy had returned and she was happy she’d acquiesced.

The friends strolled along the shore, picking up shells, laughing from time to time as they compared notes on the workshops. “Is Ron Beloit really sitting in on your workshop, Sarah? What’s he like? He’s always been my favorite disc jockey.”

“Yeah, he is. And so is his moon-faced teenage son; and I wish both of them would disappear. For two days sonny has been reading his long epic poem on California. His father sits next to him grinning like a chimpanzee. If sonny boy keeps this up, no one else will have a chance to read. And that damn, so-called leader panders to the ‘star,’ when I can tell by the look in his eye he’s as bored as I am with the romanticized drivel that kid spouts.”

“Too bad. Say, speaking of ‘stars,’ have you met Roxane? I met her last year. She’s super friendly; doesn’t act like a prima-donna at all.”

“Steffie, what are you talking about?”

“You know, Roxane, the movie star with one name—like Cher. She’s the voluptuous blonde who looks like a cross between Shirley Temple and Mae West. You know, sugar and spice and everything nice. Dimples and daring.”

“Bet her real name was Maybelle Higgins and the studio named her Roxane. By the way, how come you know about Mae West? She probably died before you were born. I barely remember her films, and I’m lots older than you.”

The sky was streaked with apricot and peach, the setting sun behind them, as Sarah and Steffie headed back to their room to freshen up. Sarah’s stride was vigorous as the roommates double-stepped across the spacious lawn, damp from the sprinkler. A stranger passing them might have assumed they were the same age; both women had high cheek color and warming smiles.

After dinner, Steffie, peppy as usual, convinced Sarah that she *must* attend Terry’s workshop. “Damn it, stop hiding in your room at night and read, ‘Whatever Turns You On,’ that piece cracked me up.”

At 8:00 P.M., Sarah fidgeted on a card chair in Terry’s motel room and checked out the other workshop participants: a small group, less than fifteen men and women, all eager to read their work aloud, or so it seemed to her. She felt as if she were in a lion’s den waiting to be devoured.

Three men read passages from their novels-in-progress. All three were written in Hemingway’s sparse, clipped style. The dialogue all sounded the same, “Half stripped, she . . .” even though the genres were different. One was a mystery, another a war story. Sarah tuned out the third man who read.

The next participant was a woman who wore a flowered cotton blouse and matching shorts. She read a long-winded essay that compared political campaigning to fishing for trout. None of them wrote any better than Sarah, and she felt more at ease.

Then a tall, well-groomed, handsome woman in her late thirties read an intriguing fantasy conversation between the editor, Maxwell Perkins, and the author, Tom Wolfe. That piece was well written, and professionally presented, and Sarah changed her mind about reading aloud. Too embarrassed to leave the room with so few in attendance, she concentrated on *not* twisting her neck from side to side.

“Who wants to read next?” Terry questioned, and when no one raised a hand, he asked, “How about you, Sarah?” Thrilled that he’d remembered her, Sarah agreed in a quiet voice, while her gut screamed, *noooooooooo*.

Sarah cleared her throat, covered her mouth with her hankie, coughed nervously, and then began:

“Whatever Turns You On!”

Dan walked toward the office water cooler. His magnificent ass moved with nary a jiggle and I felt my breasts expand. I pulled my sweater tight and crossed my arms over my chest to conceal my embarrassment. I didn’t want to reveal myself too quickly. I remembered the last time . . .

John had obviously been interested in me. He’d smiled, batted his eyelashes, and touched his hand to his hair a lot, the way men do. Then, when we danced and my breasts pushed against his chest innocently, he was repulsed by my aggressiveness and rushed me off the dance floor before the music even stopped.

I wish I could be more like Mary Louise. Her breasts distend at the sight of a well-turned ass, too, but when they do, she is able to strut with pride, her 40-Z’s constrained within her jock-bra. She told me, “When I lie to men, I can actually expand to 45-Z’s.” Lucky her, I have trouble lying at all.

I asked Mary Louise, “What makes you feel so proud?”

“Shit, Millie,” she replied, “when you’ve got it, flaunt it. I love to see their eyes bug out when I pass by. Tits really turn them on. I’m proud to be a woman. That’s where the power is. Unless my boobs swell, they know I’m not interested. I like to be the one in control.”

I wish I were more like Mary Louise. I remember all the cold showers, the times I couldn’t get up from the table until the tender swelling of my breasts receded. It’s a humiliation and I still burn with remembered shame.

I resent all those men who only notice me when my breasts are swollen to their full 38-X’s. I’ve tried to control my thoughts and thus my dimensions, but every time I see a man with a strong jaw and a dimple in his chin—zoom, pudunk, plop, my breasts grow and expand, independent of my will. It’s as hard on me now as it was when I turned thirteen and it happened for the first time.

Men never have this problem. They can keep their emotions to themselves, not revealed to the world — at large. And the other problem; the times my breasts just won’t swell and cooperate when I really want them to. Those times are even more depressing.

Men always want to be appreciated for their minds. I’m not interested in listening to their views on world problems. Obviously, they spend most of their time in the men’s room combing their hair, so what do they know.

I keep searching for my dream man. I find one who seems to fit my needs, but I sleep with him once and he becomes utterly dependent on me. He wants to see me constantly and he leans on me emotionally. Hell, I can barely support myself, let alone him.

What I really want is a nice man who is good in bed, cooks like an angel, types my letters and doesn’t interfere with my life. After all, I have my career to think of. I just don’t have the time to be romantic. Men just want too much. I need sex, not a father.

I tried the single's bars, but the guys who show up there are obvious losers. If someone had asked them for a date, they wouldn't be in a single's bar. I tried one of those single's cruise weekends, and the pickings were even worse. In particular, I remember a man who sat with his legs crossed and his head down. Once, in jest, some woman whistled at him, and he fell overboard.

I'm really desperate! Ten minutes until quitting time and I don't know what to do with myself tonight. I'm sick of working out at the gym, or stopping for a beer at Land's End. I feel so lonely I guess I have no alternative; I'll have to call Harry. I'll ask him to fix my favorite dinner, lobster thermidor.

He always complains that it's too much work, but he never refuses. Poor Harry, he tries to be a good husband. He drops my suits off at the cleaner and keeps the kids out from under foot. He's a great cook, and he never pulls that, "I've got a headache" routine.

Yes, I'll call Harry, he'll be thrilled I'm not *working late* at the office tonight and he'll greet me at the door and hand me my "perfect martini."

As Sarah read, aware of titters and chuckles, she wondered if they were laughing with her or at her. When she finished reading the last sentence, laughter and applause filled the room. There was foot stomping and one man shouted from the back of the room, "Right on Sarah!" "God, you're a funny lady," someone else called out. The man sitting next to her leaned close and said, "You can really write. I like your spontaneity and humor."

Sarah was puzzled. She'd hoped the women might enjoy the piece, but had assumed it would turn off the men. Instead, they were even more responsive. Her breasts didn't swell in pride, but her self-esteem increased as the applause continued. Sarah basked in the group's approbation, and identified with Bart, the entertainer. She bet he'd craved and enjoyed attention as much as she did.

The room was charged with excitement; everyone had something to say: “Boy, she’s sure got our number!” “Yeah,” said another man, “my skin’s peeling off from so many cold showers and I’m almost forty!” “Braggart!” a woman chimed in with a laugh.

When it was quiet enough for Terry to speak, he looked at Sarah, grinned and said, “That was great! Rules of writing can be taught, but no one can teach humorous writing. It’s a special gift, and you have it. In all the workshops—and that’s been a helluva lot—no one before ever received a standing ovation. Congratulations.”

After Sarah’s triumph, no one else had the nerve to read and the group dispersed around midnight. The roommates were both in bed by 1:00 A.M. Steffie turned out the light and said, “Good night, sweet dreams—you deserved tonight’s applause.”

Sarah lay on her back, her hands overlapped, cupped under her head, her elbows poking the air, her smile a light beam in the darkness. She relived the whole fantastic experience, remembering every comment she’d heard. One man had said, “I do stand-up comedy, and your timing is great; you know when to pause and wait for a laugh. Timing is everything!” That’s what Bart always said.

“Are you proud of me, Daddy?” Sarah silently asked, luxuriating in the response to what she’d read. She’d never experienced anything like it, not from anyone for anything; and she owned it. She didn’t turn her success into something less, and smiled her way into sleep.

In the morning as she walked toward the dining room, Sarah discovered she’d become an overnight sensation. People who had never said so much as “Good morning,” greeted her like a long-lost friend, smiling, making comments: “Hey, I heard you read a great piece last night. Wish I’d been there,” and “Sorry I missed the workshop. Heard you read a fabulous piece.” And “When are you reading again? I don’t want to miss out.”

Sarah’s feet barely touched ground, she felt so lighthearted. It hadn’t been a fluke, the group really liked her work, or they wouldn’t have mentioned it to others.

Euphoric, she turned quickly when she heard her name called and stared upward into Roxane's dazzling blue eyes.

Roxane's capped teeth sparkled in the sunlight as she smiled and said, "Terry pointed you out to me at breakfast. I'd told him I'd heard some boisterous carrying on last night; my suite's above his room.

"I'm sorry. I know who you are, but you don't know me. My name is Roxane." The star stretched out her hand to shake Sarah's and said, "Congratulations!"

The women stood chatting on the path between the two spacious lawns, as if they'd know one another for some time. In their five-minute conversation they discovered that both their backgrounds included Chicago.

Roxane glanced at her gold-linked, braceleted timepiece and said, "Oops, I don't want to be late for my workshop. How about meeting me for lunch, sweetie? My treat."

Sarah walked away in a daze. Wait'll Steffie hears about this. Roxane was everything Steffie described and more. She might be plump, but she was one gorgeous woman; that smile, those eyes, no wonder she starred in movies.

In the poetry workshop, sonny-boy continued reading: "The bright, beaming, incandescent moon, luminous, radiant, and fulsome in it's brilliance . . ." and Sarah tuned him out and replayed last night's marvelous achievement. She smiled at the wonderment of Terry's words. He really thought she could write. And a "movie star" sought her company. WOW!

Sonny-boy thought Sarah was smiling at his words and directed his gaze to her as he read the last line: "California, the growth land of beauty, mountainous highways to heaven. The end." He leaned toward Sarah and said, "Thanks for your attention, I always look at you when I'm reading. So many of the others just seem to drift off into their own space."

Sarah joined Roxane in the dining room at noon. They sat in a back booth chuckling over the “epic poem” before they glanced at their menus.

“How did you hear about *that*?” Sarah asked.

“Everyone on campus knows about *that*! Shame on Ron, playing unctuous daddy. He should know better. He’s behaving like a shit, taking advantage of his name and reputation. That’s a no-no as far as I’m concerned.”

Roxane, as outspoken and spontaneous as Bart, also punctuated her conversation with “shit,” but when she said the word, it didn’t sound crude, but dipped in honey. What a neat lady, Sarah thought, as she poked at her food, too excited to eat.

Roxy, “Please call me Roxy; all my friends do,” had no problem wolfing down a BLT and strawberry shortcake without missing a word of dialogue. Quick with Bon mots, she stimulated Sarah’s fast repartee. Both women laughed heartily, oblivious to the attention they received from the other diners.

They each shared their past with openness. Before the lunch had ended, Sarah knew that Roxane’s parents had died when she was eleven, that she’d been raised in Chicago by her Austrian grandmother, and had, at fourteen, played the role of Corliss Archer in *Kiss and Tell*, off Broadway. At fifteen she’d appeared in her first movie, wearing an oversized, highly decorated hat, in a remake of the *Follies* of 1929.

“That’s when I had a knock-out figure,” she said. “My boobs were as large as they are now, but my ass was a hell of a lot smaller.” She laughed, “Now I have the figure of the Venus of Wiffendorf. Oversized to boot,” and signaled for the waitress.

She ordered more coffee and said, “Honey, bring me another piece of that delicious shortcake.”

That night Sarah lay awake from excitement, not sorrow. When she finally dozed off she dreamed she was on stage in an enormous theater, receiving a standing ovation. Shouts of “Well done,” “Bravo,” were cut off by the buzz, buzz, buzz of the alarm. Jolted awake, she was surprised that Steffie had already left; normally Steffie was still asleep when Sarah closed the door behind her.

On the way to breakfast Sarah bumped into Terry and impulsively asked if she could meet with him, privately. “There’s something I need to ask.”

“Sure, funny lady,” Terry chuckled in response. “Meet me in the dining room.”

Sarah dawdled over lunch, impatiently waiting for Roxane to leave Terry’s table. When she finally stood, Sarah laid her napkin across her half-filled plate, nodded to Steffie, and said, “Wish me luck.”

Seated across from Terry, he came right to the point. “So, how can I help you, Sarah?”

“I need your advice. As a professional artist, I know there are no definitive answers, but I need to ask anyway.”

“Okay, so go ahead, ask.”

“Two nights ago, in your workshop, I received more response and encouragement than I have ever received from my art work. I need to know—was that a fluke?” Without waiting for a response Sarah continued, “I’ve finally found my niche in the art world. To write a novel, I’d have to devote what little time I had after work to writing, and there would be no time left for art. If I stop my visual work to concentrate on writing, and then find I’m a failure, it would be too late to backtrack and gain the recognition I’ve strived for.”

Terry listened to every word without interrupting, but he did look relieved when Sarah finally asked, “Am I deluding myself, Terry? Could I really write a novel?”

“I won’t kid you. Anyone who asks, ‘Can I be a writer?’ gets a straight answer from me. Nothing less than the truth. ‘Can I write? Become a writer? Do I have the talent? That’s what you’re really asking, isn’t it?’”

“Yes.” Apprehensive at how Terry might respond, she bit her lower lip and waited for his reply.

“Writing is *more* than talent. Writing is very hard work and there is no justification for leading anyone on. What you need is the guts and courage to sit down

every day and stare at a blank sheet of paper and write with honesty. Complete honesty. Anything less than the truth, tearing out words from your gut, is pretense and delusion. It's no joke about 'Bleeding into the typewriter.' Do you have the guts for that kind of dedication? Only you can answer that. If you have the drive and determination and if, and it's a big if, you have something to say, what you write could be published. You can't want to be a writer; you have to write; there's no alternative. If that's how you feel, go for it and lots of luck."

Sarah hurried toward her workshop, then stopped abruptly. That damn kid was probably still getting feedback on that God-awful poem. The hell with it. She headed toward the ocean.

Seated on the sand, Sarah removed her sandals and fumbled through her carry-all for a ball-point pen and paper, and wrote every word Terry had said. When she finished she reread it and asked herself, "Do I *have to be* a writer? Do I have the guts, the courage?" and a voice from within screamed, *yes, yes, yes*.

Hugging herself, the sun licking her face, Sarah no longer felt the need to say, "Oh, anyone could do it." Deep in thought, she was caught off guard when the wind picked up and blew sand in her face. She dusted off, slipped into her shoes, stood up, and walked back to her room. Once there, she changed into her bathing suit and headed for the outdoor swimming pool.

At pool side, Roxane was already stretched out on a lounge chair, wearing a flowing, multi-colored caftan, shouting purple polish on her pedicured toes, and a matching purple ribbon tied around her platinum blonde ponytail. Heavy, oversized gold hoops dangled from her ears and matched the linked gold Rolex bracelet/watch on her wrist. She waved at Sarah to join her, and her five-carat diamond ring flashed in the sunlight.

"What are you reading?" Sarah asked, as she approached.

"Jane Austin."

Duly impressed, Sarah said, “You must have a degree in literature. I have trouble reading Austin. My degree is in art.”

“I don’t need letters after my name. My degree is in *life*! I’ve never spent a day in college. I’ve never had time. The more you read Austin, the more you’ll understand.”

It was more than pleasant lounging by the pool, discussing literature and life. When the workshops ended, Roxy and Sarah were no longer the only sunbathers. One woman swam to the side of the pool nearest Roxane, and in a sycophantic voice said, “Roxy, I’m a great admirer of yours. Of course, I was only a child when you were the heroine of . . .”

Before the intruder finished her sentence, Roxane cut her off, “Only my friends call me Roxy. If you’ll excuse me, I’m reading,” and she buried her head in her book.

The woman, still persistent, turned her attention to Sarah and asked, “Are you somebody, too?”

“No. Not yet!” Sarah laughed and buried her head in Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*. Ignored, the abrasive woman broodingly swam away.

When she was half-way across the pool, Sarah and Roxy looked at each other and cracked up laughing. “I like your style,” Roxane grinned. “I like you. Before we leave for home, give me your phone number. When we’re back in the city, I’ll give you a call. We can swim at my place with privacy, and not be interrupted by the likes of that.” Roxy rolled her eyes toward the woman laddering out of the pool.

On Saturday morning, Sarah hugged Steffie good-bye and promised to stay in touch. She hoisted her luggage and typewriter into the car trunk, slipped in under the steering wheel, and headed south to L.A. Filled with the exciting possibility that she could indeed write a novel, the driving seemed effortless, until the Ventura Freeway. In minutes, a young jerk drove past at a very high speed and gave Sarah the finger. She took both hands off the wheel, for a split second, and gave him both middle fingers, laughing as her hands returned to the wheel.

By the time Sarah parked in the carport and dragged in her luggage and typewriter, she'd lost her enthusiasm and doubted that she'd ever hear from Roxane.

The apartment seemed cold and empty after a week. Sarah wandered back and forth, sorting out clothes between the laundry bag and the dresser. She knew from experience that this sense of loss would pass, but the contrast between an inspiring week and the emptiness of her life in L.A. seemed unbearable. She wondered if she'd ever feel at home, anywhere. She hadn't spoken a word to anyone since she'd driven away from the Miramar. Saying, "fill'er up" at the gas station hardly counted as a conversation. After a very full week of talk, talk, talk, the silence in her apartment was profound. Readjusting was always difficult.

Sarah watered her plants, rinsed the ashtray she'd already filled with butts, filed papers, and then grilled a cheese sandwich to nibble on while she watched the news. What a bore. Sarah had become apolitical once she'd left Vanderville. She needed all her energy just to survive. After she ate, she paced back and forth, moving an artifact an inch in one direction or the other. Seeing her shadowed reflection in the window as it grew dark, she was inspired to put on a Spike Jones cassette. She drew arms back and forth across her bent knees and Charlestoned across the living room. Fast music and dancing often worked like a charm to change her mood.

The tape ended and Sarah collapsed on the floor, her head on the bean bag. She felt useless, despite all the therapy. Unless she accomplished something she considered valuable, each and every day, she still felt worthless. Her "vacation" was now a memory and all she had to look forward to was the same old boring routine: work, Carla, work.

She sat up, crossed her legs in the yoga position, straightened her back, and asked the universe, "Do I have the courage and talent to write a book?" and an old memory popped up. "If you have something to say, you'll find the way to express it." That's what a Penland instructor had said.

Sarah knew beyond a doubt that she had something to say, and if she could spare one woman the suffering she'd experienced — being objectified for a lifetime — then

bleeding into a typewriter would be worth the effort. She'd learned about life from reading novels; perhaps others could learn from what she wrote—that, at least, was her hope and her dream. In a novel she could exaggerate, color, overdraw, and embroider facts. Sarah could create with words rather than paint. "I'll do it!" She caught herself talking out loud to an empty room and laughed. Had she finally gone 'round the bend?

Propped up in bed by 8:30 P.M., she counted on her fingers the weeks until the museum show and scribbled notes: Buy large tube, Titanium White (acrylic, of course) extender medium . . . then turned to a fresh page and wrote: "It's not that I want to write, it's that I have to write." She knew she'd never find peace until she cleared her father's name. In a novel she could accurately describe his character, his smile, the way he smelled, his height, the way he moved. His stories would have a larger audience.

"Yes!" She remembered her father telling her about the night a drunk shot out all the lights in the Flamingo Lounge. He'd looked at her and said, "There's a book in every man, Sarah." Then he'd leaned across the dinner table, touched her gently on the arm, and said, "and you'll have to write it for me." Once her work was installed in the county museum, she'd clean out her studio, pack away equipment, and turn the area into a writing space. Somewhere she'd find the time to immortalize her father. In a novel, Bart's daughter could be taller, wiser, and more beautiful than the original.

The phone jangled and Sarah giggled as she slipped out of bed wondering who'd be calling her after 10:00 P.M.

"Hi, sweetie, it's Roxy here. Just checking in to see if you arrived home safely. How about coming over tomorrow for lunch and a swim?"

CHAPTER 48

Preparations for the County Museum show kept Sarah engaged in her studio and she relished the work, knowing intuitively that she would not be in this studio come winter.

She continued to enjoy Roxane's spontaneous invitations, "Come on over, sweetie, let's take a dip," or "I just whipped up your favorite—lobster thermadore," (she'd read "Whatever Turns You On!"). Roxy laughed and added, "get your ass over here pronto and we'll eat the chicken casserole Rosa left on the kitchen counter."

At least once a week, sometimes twice, Sarah relished Roxane's companionship: a swim, the rare exercise she enjoyed, and dinners that she didn't have to prepare. She'd even learned to appreciate Rosa's tortilla's, enchiladas, and refried beans — definitely not a midwestern menu.

After dinner, Roxane suggested, "Let's go for a dip."

"I don't have my suit with me. Besides, I've eaten so much I'd sink to the bottom."

"First of all, who the hell said anything about a bathing suit. If we can't skinny dip at midnight in my private pool on an isolated mountain top, why the hell am I paying the pool man? And as far as sinking to the bottom, who the hell cares, I'm pretty close to it now," Roxy said, as she wobbled to her feet and giggled, "Race you to the pool."

They raced through the house, through the sliding French doors, and onto the patio. Roxy had her muumuu over her head and dropped to the cement before Sarah had even unbuttoned her blouse.

At poolside, Roxy paused, her perfectly proportioned, overweight but solid body gleamed in the moonlight as she dove like a porpoise into the water and surfaced

laughing. She shouted up to Sarah, “Stop being such a chicken shit! Drop your drawers and dive in.”

The water clothed Sarah’s naked body as she lapped across the pool; she felt warm and delicious in her nakedness and reveled in the unrestrained freedom.

Sarah dropped more than her drawers the night she’d skinny dipped with Roxane. She’d dropped another layer of “respectability.” Roxane was as blunt and outspoken as Bart; they both had the same vibrant energy. When Roxane spoke, Sarah listened.

“Give up your damned middle-class polite behavior,” Roxy advised. “If you want to speak up, open your mouth and whatever pops out will belong to you; not some societal twaddle that was fed to you long ago. My shrink says I’ve taken the responsibility for my feelings and actions. I suggest you do the same. Be your own wonderful self, and don’t let anyone tell *you* how to live. Good God! *I’ve* just told you how to live. Boy, will my therapist have a field day with that; *if* I tell her!”

After the midnight swim, Sarah had opened her mouth and was shocked at the words that spilled out—maybe it was the wine, maybe not. Taking a deep breath, she said, “I was about to leave but I want to share something. Could we sit at the kitchen table for a few minutes?”

Roxane pulled out a chair for Sarah, plunked down on the chair across from her, cold sober from the skinny dip, and said, “Okay, shoot!”

Swallowing the lump forming in her throat, Sarah blurted out, “My father was murdered when I was twenty-two.” Without a pause for reaction, she continued, “I thought if I lived respectably, and God knows I honed that role to perfection, I could live down the shame and face my friends and neighbors without fear of rejection. When my father died, old friends crossed the street to avoid speaking to me.

“I’ll never know who killed him. Or why. I know it’s crazy, but I feel that if I could answer that question, I could accept the fact of his murder and get on with my life.”

“Honey, you are worthy of respect no matter how your father died. How sad that you’ve lived with shame all these years for something that was out of your control. If you really want to know who killed your father, I can help.”

“You can? How?”

“I’m three phone calls away from anything I want to know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You can learn anything you want in three phone calls. If the first person you call doesn’t have the information, they’ll pass you along to someone else and so on. Of course the first caller has to know what you’re talking about. So I’ll need more information. Do you have any idea at all who might have been responsible for your father’s death?”

“The papers wrote that he was an alleged member of the mob, but I’ve never believed that. Is that the kind of information you need?”

“Exactly. The mob and their connections permeate show biz. Remember, I’m from New York. I know who to call. I won’t mention his name — that’s something you don’t need to know — but he’ll steer me in the right direction.”

“Oh, God. Could you really find out? I’d be eternally grateful if you could. It’s scary, though. What if you learn the truth and I can’t bear it? But not knowing is worse.”

“Give me a couple of days and I’ll get back to you.”

Three days later Roxy called. “Okay, I have information about your father’s death. Are you ready to hear it?”

Sarah felt like she had just been kicked in the stomach. She coughed nervously and choked out, “I’ve got to risk it. Go ahead, tell me.”

Her hands shook as she lit a cigarette and listened. “Your father died a long time ago,” Roxy said, “so there are gaps, but I learned plenty. What I tell you may destroy some of your fantasies, but here goes.

“About the time your father was murdered, Senator Kefauver was investigating underworld activities in Chicago. A seventeen-volume Congressional Report has recently been released to the public. The librarian can order it for you. My informant said you’ll be able to validate his information if you read that.”

Sarah’s eyes blinked repeatedly as she twisted her neck to release tension and twirled the slender gold bracelet Roxy had given her. She silently repeated the mantra, “No more worry, no more fear,” as she listened to Roxane.

“Calumet City was a syndicate town — probably still is — and your father owned six taverns. The Mafia wanted more of the action. You’ve told me how feisty your father was, and my source confirmed that your father believed what he earned was his and he didn’t want to share his ‘take’ with anyone. He’d given in to the mob’s threats in the past and paid some ‘rental fees,’ but give the mob part of his profits? Never.

“Your father was *not* a member of the syndicate, but he had a friend who was. What was the name of the guy who drove around in the taxi with your father the night he was killed? Never mind, that’s not important. What is important is that your father knew too much about syndicate-related activities. With the Kefauver investigation in progress, the mob feared he’d testify. Your father was subpoenaed — did you know that?”

“No. The only thing I know for sure,” Sarah said in a choked voice, “was that he paid off the mob by renting their jukeboxes. He gave me one that he owned.”

“Do you think he would have given damaging evidence to the Kefauver committee?”

“He might have. On the other hand, he told me never to be a tattle-tale.” Sarah sucked on her cigarette like a thumb and remained silent until Roxy asked, “Are you all right? Do you want me to continue?”

“Yes, but first let me tell you what just occurred to me. I’d like your opinion. My father was dying of cirrhosis. Maybe, just maybe, he thought it wouldn’t make any difference if he blew the whistle on the mob—he’d be dying soon anyway. That fits my

picture of him. He would have loved being a hero and having the fame he'd always wanted. What do you think?"

"Anything's possible. You know his personality better than I do. I can only repeat what my source told me. Your father was definitely *not* a member of the Mafia, but he was killed by the mob in the traditional way — ambushed and shot repeatedly.

"Your grandfather owned a whole block of buildings in Hammond, didn't he?"

"It was one brick building, a block wide. In fact, the last time I went back East, I drove out of my way just to see if that building still existed. It did, and it looked shabby but basically the same. A Burger King had replaced the butcher shop, but above it on the second floor was the apartment I'd once lived in. Someone was living there—there were ragtag curtains limping out the open window. The fire station was gone, but all the other spaces were rented, and above the entrance to the ballroom there was my grandfather's name and the date he had it built: MINDEL—1914, in granite letters five feet high. There was still a corner tavern—the same space that had housed my grandfather's tavern and my father's ice-cream parlor.... I'm sorry, Roxy, when I'm nervous I get wound up and change the subject; what was your question?"

"Don't worry about it, Sarah. If it were me listening to this kind of news, I'd be screaming my head off. I'd asked about your grandfather's building."

"How did your informant know about that?"

"He didn't. I just put two and two together with the facts you've shared. You told me about the ice-cream parlor and the fact that after Prohibition was repealed, your father turned the space back into a tavern."

"That's right, but I'm not following you."

"What I'm saying is that your father, like his father before him, owned a tavern long before he moved to Calumet City. He'd built up his business even before the war, before the mob moved in."

“Yes, it was during the Second World War that Calumet City was wide-open — the hot spots could stay open later than the closing time across the state line in Hammond.”

“There was big money made in those war years, Sarah, and the Mafia wanted in. They bought off whoever they could, but you know your father’s attitude toward money. He resented the pay-offs, and probably skimmed money off the top. The mob couldn’t allow anyone to get away with that so they had him killed.”

“But he was killed long after the end of the war.”

“So they let him get away with it for awhile. I can’t pinpoint all the motives for your father’s murder. There are still unanswered questions. But, I hope you can take consolation in knowing for certain that your father was definitely *not* a member of the syndicate.”

Sarah’s feelings were conflicted. She was torn between the relief of knowing, with certainty, that her father wasn’t a criminal and the waves of grief that shook the cigarette out of her hand.

“Are you there, Sarah?”

“Sorry, I dropped my cigarette and missed what you just said. I just heard the tail end. Would you mind repeating?”

“I said, every man in the liquor business has a mistress, and it’s for more than sex. Someone has to keep an eye on the till when the owner’s away. You told me your father had a mistress and how much that bothered you. Well, Honey, he had to have someone to discuss business with, he sure couldn’t talk to your mother.

“My informant knew your father’s mistress. He said, ‘Madeline, she’s one helluva gal, married now with a couple of kids.’ “

Sarah felt as sick to her stomach as she had when she’d remembered the farmer, and knew she couldn’t listen to another word. “Thank you, Roxy,” she said, “thank you very much for finding out the truth. I know it’s the truth, but now I have to absorb this information before I can hear anymore. I’ll call you in a couple of days.”

Doubled over with stomach cramps, Sarah rushed from the phone to the bathroom. She sat on the toilet rocking back and forth as waves of pain engulfed her. Covering her face with her hands, she grunted and groaned.

Relieved at last, she stood at the sink and stared at her mirrored image, her pale face, perspiration beading at her hairline. Was this the only way her body could rid itself of all the shit in her life?

Fifteen minutes later, Sarah pounded out her pain on the typewriter keys. She typed the complete dialogue of her conversation with Roxane. Writing was definitely a better way to cleanse her soul than cramping up.

The library opened at 10:00 A.M., and Sarah was waiting outside before the door was unlocked. At the front desk she asked for the head librarian and, introducing herself, she requested information on the seventeen volumes of the Kefauver report. The librarian had never heard of it, but she made a few phone calls — probably three — and informed Sarah that one of the volumes was a summary. She'd order it from the state library. "When it arrives, I'll give you a call. Be patient, it may take a while."

Sarah hurried home and made phone calls of her own. She dialed Chicago information and scribbled the number of Jacob Asher, her father's former attorney. When his secretary answered, she said, "Just tell him it's Bart Mindel's daughter."

"Hello, Mr. Asher. You probably don't remember me. I'm Sarah, Bart's daughter."

"Of course I remember you, Sarah. I always wondered what happened to you. How's your mother?"

"My mother's fine, thanks for asking. I divorced Bob and now I live in L.A., but my father's death still troubles me. I know I haven't spoken to you since you settled my father's estate in about '53 or '54, but I'm hoping you'll remember enough to answer a few questions for me."

"Of course, if I can."

Sarah took a deep breath and asked, “Do you know? Was my father a member of the syndicate?”

“Absolutely not. I am surprised at your question. I would *never* handle any legal work that even hinted at a relationship with the underworld.”

“I apologize if I’ve insulted you. I don’t believe my father was, but I wanted verification.” “I handled all your father’s legal affairs, Sarah, and believe me, if he’d been a member of the syndicate, he would have had a lot more money. He had plenty, but not that much by syndicate standards. Is that what you need to know?”

“Yes, thanks. Do you remember anything else about his business affairs?”

“You’ve caught me by surprise, I haven’t thought about your father’s business in a long time. But I just remembered something that might interest you. He did have a friend who was a member of the mob — the one he drove around with in a taxi the night he died. Well, your father had lent him \$10,000 a month or so before he died. When your mother came home from the hospital, I asked her whether she wanted me to sue for repayment and she told me not to pursue collecting it, but to write off the loan as a tax deduction. I wondered about that at the time. Your mother’s a real lady, but she was adamant about collecting all the other outstanding debts, even from her nephew. His name was Zack, if I remember correctly.

“I really like your mother, she’s a fine woman. Did she stay well, or was she hospitalized again? Going through what she did would give anyone a nervous breakdown.”

“She had several more, but she’s been well for ten years. Thanks for your help and consideration.”

“If I can be of further help, Sarah, please call again. Your father always spoke with pride about you, the kind of pride a man usually reserves for a son. I suspect that in you he found both; a loving daughter and an accomplished son.”

Sarah typed the notes she’d taken during the conversation, then redialed Chicago information. “Calumet City,” she said. “I’d like the number of Madeline Dougherty”

(Roxane had supplied Madeline's married name). There were three listings for Dougherty, and Sarah jotted down all the numbers. After one wrong number, the second call brought results.

"May I speak to Madeline Dougherty?"

"Who wants to talk to her?"

"Please tell her it's Sarah Mindel, Bart's daughter."

"Well, whatcha know, Bart's daughter! Hi, Sarah, it's me, Madeline. I just had a check ya out before I'd admit to it. Never know who wants to catch up withcha."

"I'm surprised you remember me. It's been a very long time."

"Of course I remember you. I've known you since you were a babe in arms, but I am surprised to hear from you after all this time. What can I do for you?"

It was amazing how quickly Madeline's folksy, Cal City accent disappeared when she knew who she was talking to. Sarah bid for time. "A friend of mine told me you were married and have children. Do you have sons or daughters?" Sarah asked, avoiding the real issue a while longer.

"Both, two boys and one girl. All grown now. My oldest son, Guy, named after his father, owns almost as many taverns as your father did. Now my husband, his father, and my younger son, Sean, work for him. Then I had a mid-life baby, and she's still in college. I still can't believe it. I always wanted a college education, and now with the support of her brothers, my daughter's getting one. It's been a hard life, Sarah — my husband never was a big earner — but maybe my daughter, with an education, will have a better life.

"Hey, don't get me started talking about my kids, or this call will break the bank. Why *did* you call me? Not to ask about my kids, I'll bet," she laughed.

Sarah, more at ease hearing Madeline's laughter, said, "My father always told me you had a great sense of humor. Speaking of my father, was he a member of the mob?"

"I never dreamed I'd be getting a question like that, from *you* of all people. Of course not. Why would you ever think that?"

“What the newspapers wrote about him after his death made me wonder.”

“Lying bastards, those damn two-bit reporters, they screwed up everything. He was killed by the mob but he wasn’t a member.

“Forget I said that. We could get in trouble just talking about this on the phone. For all I know, this phone could be wired.”

“Then please call me from a pay phone and reverse the charges. I’ll send you fifty dollars for your time and trouble.”

“For sure I could use the money, but I couldn’t take a dime from a daughter of Bart’s. Give me a day or two to think about it, then if I can, I’ll give you a call back. What’s your number?”

Each afternoon, when Sarah returned from work, she checked her answering machine, hoping for a message from Madeline. By the end of the week, when Madeline hadn’t called, Sarah was certain she never would.

Sunday morning, Sarah was pleased and surprised when she answered the phone and the operator said, “I have a collect call for you from Madeline. Will you accept the charges?”

“Yes.”

“Hello, is that you, Sarah?”

“Yes, thanks for calling me back.”

“I’ve been trying for days but you’re never home, and calling collect the operator wouldn’t leave a message on your damn answering machine. I’ve been thinking a lot about your father since you called. He was a great man. I really loved that little guy. His heart was bigger than he was,” she laughed.

“Before we get into anything serious, I want to know why, after all these years, you got around to calling me? You wouldn’t even look in my direction at the funeral home.”

“I’m sure you can understand why. I was afraid someone would tell my mother you were there.”

“Your mother, she always treated me like dirt. But not your father. He always treated me with respect.”

“I know more about life now, Madeline. In those days the thought that my father had a mistress really offended me.”

“Mistress, hell! Bart never paid my rent, or for that matter paid any of my bills. I earned the money working for him. As far as him being my lover, that happened only once. When your mother caught us, he told me it would never happen again. We were business associates. Friends, that’s all.”

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks for telling me that, Madeline. I’ve always wondered. You know, I really liked you when I was a little girl and my father introduced us.”

“I liked you, too. You were a darlin’ little girl. Sweet as pie. Now tell me why you asked that question about the mob?”

“My father’s death has troubled me for years, and I know I’ll never have any peace until I learn the truth. For a long time I denied the whole ghastly business. Now knowing what really happened is very important to me. Please tell me what you remember, no matter how trivial it might seem to you. Please tell me any details you recall.”

Madeline paused and then said, “Okay, if you really want to know. I’ve never mentioned the night your father was murdered to anyone, not even my husband, and he’s bugged me about it from time to time.... That night, before your father was killed, he drove around in a cab with Benji Schapiro for a couple of hours. When he returned to the DOG HOUSE, he motioned for me to come into his office.

“He locked the door behind us and wrote a note — he was afraid the help might eavesdrop. The note read: ‘Benji warned me that unless I promise to lie to the Kefauver committee, the mob will have me killed.’

“I whispered in his ear, ‘What are you going to do?’ and he wrote: ‘I don’t know.’

“He left the joint about 3:30 A.M. and at 3:50 I called your mother to see if he’d arrived home safely. She said no and hung up on me. That woman always hated my guts.”

“That fits, the papers said he was killed about 4:00 A.M. If he didn’t know when he wrote that note to you whether he would testify or not, why would the mob have killed him that night?”

“I’ve often wondered about that myself, and I have a theory. That bastard Benji was a member of the syndicate. I always hated his guts, but your father told me Benji was his protector, his friend. I’ll bet the two of them drove around in that cab for hours with Benji putting the pressure on, telling your father to keep a muzzle on his mouth. But, knowing your father as well as I did, he probably argued, and Benji knew it was up to him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Benji started out as a hit man for the mob. I know that for a fact. Everyone on the strip knew it. Then he opened up a couple of joints on the strip with mob money. He and your father talked business and shared a lot of laughs. Your father lent him ten grand to pay off a gambling debt, I remember that. But that no good rotten bastard is the one who killed Bart. If I had a million dollars, that’s what I’d bet. I’m so sure of it.”

“If Benji was a friend of my father, how could he be the killer?”

“That’s part of the blood oath garbage the mob demands. If someone has to be bumped off, the best friend of the victim has to be the hit man to prove his loyalty.”

Sarah bit her lower lip until it bled. She knew in her gut that what Madeline had said was true.

“I’ve risked a lot confiding in you, Sarah. If the mob ever knew I told . . . long ago they warned me that if I ever talked, they’d kill one of my kids.”

“Oh, God, Madeline.”

“Oh, what the hell, everyone concerned is probably dead by now, so what’s to worry. That bastard Benji died in a car accident years ago. Come to think of it, I wonder if it was an accident?”

“My father always told me what a great gal you were, at least he did when my mother wasn’t around. He respected you and your business sense. I admired you, too, but felt like I was disloyal to my mother for feeling that way.”

“You said at the beginning of this conversation you’ve learned from life, well, so have I, toots. Now that I have a husband who fools around with the ladies behind my back, I can appreciate why your mother wanted me fired. You know, Sarah, I really loved your father. He was the best friend of my life. He knew he could trust me and he did. I hope what I’ve told you will give you some peace of mind. I’m glad I’ve had the chance to tell you what I know. Your father would have wanted me to. He may have watered the B-girls drinks, but he had integrity. I’ll bet anything he would have blown the lid off if he’d had a chance to testify.”

“We may never speak again, Madeline, in this life, but believe me, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

CHAPTER 49

Sarah delivered three new assemblages to the Los Angeles County Museum, one week before the September opening of “Boxes and Bogy.” She handed her identification slip to the guard on duty at the employee’s entrance and filled out the form he supplied.

Sarah hoisted one cumbersome construction from the cement and held the unwieldy burden as she waited impatiently for the guard to press the entrance buzzer. Sarah was painfully aware that she would repeat this charade twice more before her art was safely inside the museum. The art work was a dead weight in her arms, yet not one security guard offered to help. They were too busy policing the work of dead artists to be mindful of a living one.

Exhausted and cynical, Sarah would never agree with the critics who viewed art as a commodity. Museums were corporations more concerned with money than art, as far as she was concerned. The air conditioned, perfectly controlled environment protected the product, but who protected the artist?

Forty minutes later, Sarah delivered her third construction to the curator’s assistant. The curator popped out of his office just long enough to ask, “Are all your pieces properly identified with your name and address?” before returning to the protection of his office.

Annoyed with his apparent lack of interest, Sarah left the office stewing. She knew that bastard made more money than she did. It wasn’t fair. She created the art; he was just the custodian.

Roxane dropped a large, ribbon-bedecked white dress box at the edge of her king size, canopied bed and motioned to Sarah. “Don’t just stand there gawking out the window, come over here and open your present.”

“My present? It’s not my birthday.”

“So, who needs a birthday to receive a gift? Hurry up, I can’t wait to see your eyes pop out!”

Gently Sarah pulled at the white satin ribbon and removed it without destroying the bow. Slowly she removed the box cover and stood staring at the lavender tissue paper.

Roxy, laughed, “Yeah sure, the paper’s great, but wait until you see what’s under it.”

Sarah removed layers of tissue and then removed the most magnificent dress she’d ever seen. She held the full-length gown at arm’s length, her eyes bright with delight, and chortled like a child, “Oh, Roxy!” her expression, a mixture of amazement and pleasure as she investigated the underskirt of lavender silk and overskirts of matching chiffon. Sunlight streaming in through the many-windowed bedroom emphasized the miniature Indian mirrors hand embroidered to secure them to the velvet bodice.

Sarah rushed to the three-way mirror in Roxane’s dressing room and held the dress under her chin; the miniature Indian brass bells, embellishing the cummerbund, tinkled and pealed. She smiled at Roxy’s mirrored reflection, head and shoulder’s above her own, and turned to her with a broad grin. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you very much,” and stood on tip-toe to plant a kiss on her friend’s cheek.

“I knew you’d love this dress. You should see the expression on your face.”

“This dress, this dress is glorious! Thank you. Thank you. But why? This gown must have cost a fortune.”

“It’s no big deal. It was gathering dust in my closet and I didn’t want you showing up at your museum opening in one of those incredible second-hand store rejects with the gaudy hey-look-at-me necklaces made out of feathers and beads. I didn’t want you wearing your uniform of leotard tops and blue jeans either. I wanted you to be a knockout, a standout. As an actress, I know the effect clothes have on an audience. Now try it on, already, so we can see if it fits.”

Once again Sarah stood in front of the three-way mirror, this time wearing the gown. She twisted this way and that to view herself from different angles as the bells became her musical accompaniment. “I feel like a music box! Who wound me up?” she laughed, as she and lavender chiffon whirled toward her benefactor.

“It fits to perfection. How did you know my size?”

“Remember a couple of weeks ago I asked for your measurements? Now you know why. I’m way too heavy to wear it and I didn’t want it rotting in the closet, so I took it to my dressmaker. I cut the label out to avoid tax when I returned from Paris a couple of years ago, so I’ve renamed the gown for you, ‘A little bit primitive and a whole lot sophisticated.’ I want you to wear this to your opening and look like a very rich, eccentric artist.”

“Boy will I ever!” Sarah grinned. Feeling teary, but afraid a tear drop would stain the velvet bodice, Sarah rushed into the bathroom and carefully removed the gown.

On the afternoon of her museum debut, Sarah laid out her lavender dress, then removed her new dyed-to-match satin pumps from their Macy’s box. She held one shoe near the chiffon skirt and sighed with pleasure. A perfect match, she thought, as she placed the unworn pumps next to the gown on her bed. To her outfit she had added new panty hose, a new white lace bra, a new lavender handkerchief. Then she stood with her thumb to her lips, appraising the colorful collage, sure she would make quite an entrance when she arrived at the museum at 7:30 P.M.

Several hours later, standing before the bathroom mirror, wearing nothing but panty hose and a bra, Sarah painstakingly applied makeup. Her skin, still damp from her leisurely shower, had absorbed the Channel #5 (a sample from Bonwits) she’d freely sprinkled on her wrists and behind her ears. The fragrance further increased her excitement. She felt like an actress preparing for a starring role. As a finishing touch she applied a double application of black mascara on her thick lashes, painted on her beauty mark, and outlined her lips with a brush. Sarah carefully applied two shades of lipstick,

pink over red to compliment the color of her dress. Then she smiled at her reflection. Not too bad for an old broad fast approaching fifty.

Fifteen minutes later, dressed, coiffured, and manicured, she stood in her stocking feet on the bed to view her bottom half in the dresser mirror. Back on the floor she stepped into her “magic slippers” and viewed her top half. “There’s nothing more I can do to gild this lily,” she chuckled.

More than ready to make her departure at 7:00, Sarah checked the contents of her lady-of-the-manor beaded purse: “comb, powder, lipstick, cigarettes, and lighter,” she chanted in an old litany. “Keys, money, hankie” . . . she was nervous.

Sarah’s slender ankles were revealed as she daintily held up the hem of her skirt and descended her front steps. She looked up when she heard a loud wolf whistle. It was her neighbor Jeff waving and shouting from across the courtyard. “You look fantastic!”

Approaching, he looked her over from head to toe and said, “Wow! You sure look different not wearing blue jeans! Now just remember, when you make your entrance, think to yourself, ‘I’m Sarah, the fine, fine artist. Go gettumm kid!’”

Appreciating this boost to her morale, Sarah grinned, said thanks, and strutted off to her car. She eased into the Pontiac and adjusted her skirt up to her knees before she closed the door. Aware for the first time how shabby the Pontiac had become, she giggled to herself, “I’m Cinderella and Roxane’s my fairy Godmother, but my coach is still mousy.”

Sarah found a parking space a block from the museum and soon found herself strolling leisurely down Wilshire Boulevard. Approaching the museum entrance, she admired the sculpture garden and the “magically” lit water fountain splaying rainbow colors and stepped aside to avoid the droplets. Her enthusiasm mounted as she held up her long skirt with one hand and climbed the museum steps, her heart pounding, not from exertion but from expectation.

On the landing, she paused to catch her breath and compose herself before she opened the massive door and made *her* entrance. She stepped inside the crowded

vestibule and her anticipation turned to apprehension as she searched in vain for a familiar face. She wished again that Roxane could have accompanied her—Roxy might have been recognized, she certainly wasn't. Roxane couldn't attend the gala opening, she was in New York on business. Sarah had also invited Gloria, but Glo had given a lame excuse, "I would if I could, but I can't."

Well-dressed dowagers and their distinguished grey-templed mates chatted in foursomes. Sarah was acutely aware of her singularity and felt like a nonentity. An expensive gown might cover her nakedness, but nothing protected her from feeling insecure.

She overheard snippets of conversation as she "excused" and "pardoned" her way across the crowded lobby:

What bores, Sarah thought, as she entered the exhibition area. She'd rather be an artist than own all the diamonds in the world. She moved close to Jasper John's target painting to inspect it, while most of the others in the room held champagne glasses and chatted to their companions.

She moved on to a Braque still-life and, concentrating on the composition, was startled when she heard her name. She turned and looked into Keith's eyes appraising her like a work of art. His golden lashes fluttered against his ashen cheeks and he looked as if he lived in the arctic, not in southern California. He probably hadn't left his garret since the last time Sarah saw him. She smiled and said hello.

"You look beautiful tonight, Sarah," Keith said, and the sparkle in his eyes reminded her that he was a kindred spirit and how much she missed his companionship. "Your work looks great and . . ." Before he could finish his sentence, a woman moved between them and said, "I'm Mrs. Beaumont, President of the Woman's Board, sorry to interrupt," and Keith drifted out of sight. "You look lovely," Mrs. Beaumont said, "Your dress is divine. One of the board members pointed you out to me, and Mr. LaGrand, the curator, told me you are one of the contributing artists. Come, show me your work, Ms. Shallot."

Thanks, Roxy, the dress is working, Sarah thought, as she led the way to one of her constructions — a weathered Victorian bird cage filled with memorabilia and topped with a tattered French boudoir doll, shackled across her possessions. Mrs. Beaumont inspected the assemblage intently and when she said, “Your work has integrity,” Sarah believed her.

Turning to Sarah and appraising her as thoroughly as she had the art, Mrs. Beaumont said, “Please call me Claudia. After the show, some members of the board and other guests will be attending a reception at my home. I hope you’ll join us.”

“Thank you, I’d love to,” Sarah beamed.

Mrs. Beaumont handed Sarah a calligraphed invitation and said, “A map and directions are printed on the back. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I just saw Mr. Cabot, one of the large contributors to the museum, and I want to say hello.”

Without the armor of mirrors and bells, Sarah would never have received an invitation. She’d been in the art world long enough to know how the game was played. If you were famous, you could wear burlap and receive attention. She hated game playing, but was delighted to be included.

When the smoke and shrill laughter became unbearable, Sarah retreated to the ladies room, repairing her makeup and fussing with her hair more than necessary to avoid returning to the stuffy exhibition area. With the rooms too crowded now to get near the art, Sarah decided to make an exit.

Outside the museum Sarah breathed deeply. So much for her big debut. She spoke to exactly two people. But Mrs. Piedmont liked her work, and so did Keith.

Settled behind the wheel, Sarah turned on the overhead light and studied the map and directions. She drove slowly, fearful she would be the first to arrive. But despite her snail’s pace, Sarah had parked across the street from number 405 before. In no hurry to make another entrance, she patted her nose with powder, applied fresh lipstick, and dabbed more Channel #5 behind her ears and at her wrists. One drop remained and she pressed it into her hankie; that emptied the sample bottle.

Fortified, Sarah stepped out of her car and approached the unpretentious white-washed concrete house across the street. She climbed the cement steps to the only hint of what might lay behind the massive double doors in front of her: a brass name plate inscribed with, "THE TYLER BEAUMONT RESIDENCE."

A uniformed maid opened one of the double doors and led the way to the living room before she disappeared. Sarah, the first to arrive, lost her embarrassment as she enjoyed the unimpeded view of the sumptuous room.

Enormous Swedish rugs, the size of most living rooms, were scattered in planned casualness across the polished oak floor. The colorful designs of orange, yellow, and rust accented the orange/rust velour upholstered sofa that stretched well into the room. Soft lights hidden judiciously behind a multitude of enormous leafy plants added to the ambiance. Sarah felt comfortable.

The interior of the house extended deep into a triple lot, providing more living space than one would assume from the street. Sarah wandered from room to room admiring the original art accented by overhead lights beaming above each framed canvas. She heard the doorbell chime several times, then a man dressed in a black tuxedo rushed past her carrying an empty silver tray.

Retracing her steps, Sarah reentered the living room, smiled shyly at anyone who looked her way, and busied herself investigating paintings she'd missed on her first walk around the room.

The black-tuxed waiter reappeared; this time the silver tray was laden with Waterford crystal. He offered champagne but Sarah said, "No, thank you. What I really need is a cigarette!" He smiled.

Seated in a far corner, Sarah dug into her beaded bag, found her cigarettes and lit one, then looked for an ash tray. Could that dinner-sized ceramic plate be one? Her question was answered by a man who stubbed out his smoke, nodded to her, and walked away.

A match had been struck to the abundant logs in the fireplace, and from her position — off stage — Sarah admired the cast shadows, the diamonds glittering and flashing from women's ear lobes, necks, and wrists. Cocktail rings sparkled as women waved at arriving friends. The fragrance of Worth and Adiamo overpowered the odor of cigarettes and mixed with the bouquet of aftershave and expensive pipe tobacco.

Over two-dozen flamed candles cast warm shadows that played deliciously across the soft-collared silk shirts the men wore and patterned the women's designer dresses. Waiters weaved in and out, presenting their crystal offerings as well as assorted canapés and hors d'oeuvres. Sarah, too nervous to eat or drink, declined refreshments but inquired as to the location of the powder room.

She dawdled in the bathroom, surprised at its furnishings. Not only did it have the normal equipment, blocked from immediate view by white painted brick, but was large enough to contain a boudoir chair and marble topped side table. At the marble sink she rinsed her hands and dried them on an Irish linen guest towel, admiring a collection of crystal perfume bottles displayed on the marble counter top.

Exiting the powder room, Sarah took a wrong turn and found herself in a wood-paneled library. Leather-bound books were displayed in oak cabinets that reached to the ceiling on three sides of the room. She settled on a well-used couch and caressed the books with her eyes before turning her attention to the wall across from where she sat. Without benefit of her glasses, she recognized nine original Schwitters collages and gasped aloud. She stood and walked to the display to examine them more closely and was appalled by one badly painted, leafless tree hung in the center of the grouping. The picture confused her by its presence amid the work of this famous artist.

Claudia Beaumont found Sarah studying the art and said, "I see you are admiring my Schwitters collection. Isn't it marvelous! My former husband was a personal friend of Man Ray and when we visited with Man in London, he escorted us to Lord's Gallery — Lord's has the largest collection of Schwitters in the world — where we purchased that," she said, pointing to the tree. "Isn't it awful? All artists begin the same way,

painting hideous landscapes, but that tree is all the more precious to me hung alongside Schwitters' mature work. It adds a touch of reality to the grouping, don't you agree?"

Sarah nodded and Kay said, "Come, let me introduce you to Zori Wooston. She enjoyed your assemblages as much as I did." The hostess, dressed in a conservative pale blue silk jacket dress, revealed her "standing" with the help of a six-carat diamond ring on the hand she extended to her guest. She led the way back to the crowded living room; and as she approached a small cluster of wealthy patrons, she put her arm around Sarah's shoulder and introduced her saying, "I want you to meet Sarah Shallot, a fabulous artist."

By midnight, Cinderella had hung her finery in a plastic bag, her shoes were returned to their original box, and she was curled up in bed in a flannel nightgown, reliving the night. She replayed bits and pieces, words spoken to her, and words she'd overheard.

"Shallot's work is strong and witty."

"I like the work, it's thoughtful and imaginative, but oh my God, it is ugly. Only this humor saves it. I'd like to crack open his skull and see what's inside."

"Have you met the artist? I wonder who *he* is?"

Wrapping herself in a bear-hug, she chortled, "Well, congratulations ol' girl, you did good. I'm proud of you."

She flipped off the bedside lamp, pulled the sheet and blanket up under her chin and recaptured Keith's words before Kay had interrupted. "Your work has wholeness and strength, just like you. You're rare, Sarah. Really rare."

Finally asleep at 3:00 A.M., Sarah dreamed of Roxane dressed like a fairy godmother waving a crystal wand bejeweled with diamonds, emeralds, and rubies.

At 10:00 the following morning, the ringing phone jarred Sarah awake. Sleepy-voiced she answered, surprised to hear Claudia Beaumont's voice. "Good morning. Hope I didn't wake you, but I wanted to catch you before you left for your studio."

Sarah smiled and responded in a more alert voice. “I don’t need to leave home; my studio is in my apartment! You’re welcome to come visit any time.”

“I hoped you’d suggest that. Zori — you met her last night — said how interesting you were. She had more time than I did to chat with you. Playing hostess kept me hopping. We’re both free this afternoon. Would that fit in with your schedule? We’d like to see more of your work.”

Without a moment’s thought or hesitation, Sarah invited the two women to join her for lunch at 1:00.

As soon as she hung up, Sarah groaned aloud, “What have I done? I must be nuts!” Now she’d have to clean the whole apartment and prepare lunch in less than three hours. For a moment she forgot she was no longer a lady-of-the-manor and had to clean her own damn toilet.

By 1:00 the apartment was spotless and a bouquet from the shared garden graced the center of a very low, cloth-covered table. Always resourceful, Sarah had had the lumberyard cut out a wooden circle that she’d placed atop a large hassock from her Vanderville days.

A cream cheese and spinach quiche rested on the stove top, ready to be popped in the oven when her guests arrived. She was pleased she’d had plenty of eggs, cheese, and chopped spinach; there had been no time to make a run to the grocery store. Jeff had lent her a bottle of white wine, but she was embarrassed that it would have to be served in water glasses.

By quarter past one her guests had not arrived, and she worried that her directions had not been clear, or if, after seeing her neighborhood, they’d changed their minds. By 1:30, her resentment surfaced and she fretted. Of all the nerve! They might have free time this afternoon, but she had plenty to do.

Claudia Beaumont and Zori Wooston arrived a fashionable, but annoying half-hour late, and Sarah buried her resentment as she flung open the door and greeted them enthusiastically. They didn’t apologize for being tardy, and Sarah didn’t mention it as

she welcomed her guests into her less than lavish surroundings. “I hope you won’t mind sitting on the floor pillows around the table while we lunch,” she said.

“How charming,” Zori responded. “So like an artist to serve in a unique way.” And the older women, still agile (all that tennis and golf), sat side saddle on their cushions. Zori picked up a stainless-steel fork to look it over while Sarah poured Jeff’s wine and wondered how much money it would cost her to replace it. All this effort would be worth it if they purchased something.

The two patrons of the arts voiced appreciation over the quiche and the mustard and vinegar dressed salad. Sarah served sliced apples, cheese, and crackers for dessert and poured coffee while her guests mentioned the names of people who had attended last night’s receptions, all of whom were unknown to Sarah.

Luncheon over, the two guests, delighted to be back up on their feet, oohed and awed over every painting Sarah dragged from cupboard and closet.

In the studio they fingered paintings stacked against the wall, peered intently at an assemblage in progress, and Sarah was surprised when Zori asked, “Do you have anything else to show us?”

Sarah’s body sagged from exhaustion as she dragged yet another construction out from beneath her worktable. They really must enjoy my work, she thought, they want to see everything. For sure they’ll buy something.

Five minutes later Claudia and Zori were at the front door thanking their hostess profusely for a lovely afternoon. “What a treat,” they said in unison. “We love to visit artists in their studios. What fun.”

Sarah leaned her back against the closed door. Worn out from “show and tell,” she plunked down on her rocker and pushed her foot so vehemently on the carpet that the rocker would have somersaulted backward if it hadn’t banged against the wall.

Those rich bitches killed her whole day because they had nothing else to do. They had no intention of buying anything. They didn’t appreciate art—it was just an

investment. If Sarah had made a name for herself, like Schwitters and Rauschenberg, she could have named her price and been rewarded for her effort.

Sarah still lived in a fantasy world: always entertaining the myth that with the next exhibition or gallery show her reputation would be assured. Then she'd be able to support herself. One kind word about her work and she was sure success and fame were just around the corner. Was she wasting her life thinking she could earn her "daily bread" without taking a full-time job?

Money, money, money! It all came back to money. Like Liza Minelli in *Cabaret*—that tune was Sarah's theme song. When she'd heard Bob or Bart discuss money, she'd turned up her nose at their base concerns. Now she understood that without money, there was no security. Poverty was bearable when you were young and had a long future ahead, but to be old and poor would be devastating. What if she became ill with no one to care for her? All of Sarah's old fears played havoc with her hopes and dreams.

CHAPTER 50

On Saturday Sarah drove the twenty miles to Palos Verdes. She scampered down the rocky path next to Marinland, sat on her favorite rock, and munched the cheese and crackers she'd tucked in her purse before leaving the apartment. She watched seagulls swoop low over the shoreline; they no longer sounded like they were crying for a lost mate. Watching the waves crack against boulders or lap softly on shore, Sarah no longer mourned her losses, but enjoyed the solitude. She had learned to like her own company.

She stood, dusted off the back of her jeans, and strolled along the shore. Tossing a pebble into the water, she watched concentric circles form before a wave obliterated them. She'd been tossed around all her life. Now she wanted to make her own waves.

Sarah wondered what she would do if she knew she would be dead in six months. She thought about that prospect while she dusted sand off her feet and put on her tennis shoes. The thought remained with her while she climbed the path up to the parking lot, slid herself under the steering wheel, and placed the key in the ignition. As she sat in the car with the motor running it came to her: she'd travel to a foreign land.

The phone jangled as Sarah turned her key in the door lock. She rushed inside and grabbed the receiver. "I know you've been waiting for the summary of the Kefauver report," the librarian said. "It arrived today."

"How late will the library stay open?"

"Until six."

"Thanks, I'll be right over."

Clutching Volume 6 of the Crime Investigation Report, Sarah sat stoney-faced on the rocker, afraid to open the book. No matter how disturbing the contents might be, Sarah knew she had to read it. She could no longer delay the inevitable. She skimmed the first few pages and then, on page four, a string of words jumped out at her: “ ... ambushed and shot after a lengthy dispute with a gang of criminals who were trying to take control...” She reread the words slowly and then concentrated on the rest of the paragraph. “It was no secret that this man had been threatened with death if he did not give a cut of his profits to organized crime. He was killed because he refused to comply. After his murder, the syndicate took over his entire operation.”

Sarah reread the paragraph twice. That report was about a man who ran a wire service, but the similarity to her father’s murder was unmistakable. She reread several other case histories, including one about a man who was killed by the mob in front of his wife and fifteen-year-old daughter because he wouldn’t cooperate with the syndicate.

Account after account of the syndicate’s infiltration into legitimate business was documented. Sarah was appalled as she read about the mob influence in movies, television, banking, football, food, dry-cleaning establishments, and florists. The words: *Juke Box* and *Liquor Industry* fairly leapt off the page.

Thumbing through the report, she recognized the name Harry Pulaski; he was the Calumet City Police Chief at the time of Bart’s murder. Reading on, Sarah’s suspicions were confirmed: Harry Pulaski was indicted for malfeasance in office. Admitting that gambling was rampant in the city, Pulaski defended his action on the grounds that the license fees from legitimate taverns were supporting Calumet City and were responsible for the low tax rate enjoyed by its citizens. “On the basis of this defense, he was acquitted of the charges and remains in office,” she read.

Sarah gasped. Gambling and the syndicate were synonymous. No wonder there was no investigation when her father was killed; the police chief had mob connections.

Page after page documented testimony about police pay-offs. Her father had told her how the police collected their loot and stuffed the bills in their pants pockets. Sarah felt sure the syndicate owned the judge too, or Pulaski would be rotting in jail. Sarah had thought she might find useful information in the report, and she had.

It came as quite a shock, however, to learn that the Mafia was headquartered in Burnham, Illinois, of all places. Sarah recalled the many times she'd driven through sleepy Burnham on her way to catch the train to Chicago in Hegewisch. She had no idea that there was more to Burnham than a golf course.

Everything fit. What she'd learned from Roxane, Madeline, her father's lawyer, and this transcript. Sarah finally had proof for what she always believed: her father had never been a member of the Syndicate. He was an innocent victim of murderers and thugs. Sarah wanted to shout her discovery—scream to the world. The newspapers had maliciously judged the victim while Mafia murderers were free to kill again.

Rocking, rocking, rocking, Sarah pieced together one detail after another, until the complete picture of Bart's death emerged. Reluctantly, Sarah forced herself to visualize the house of her youth; the side door near the driveway where Bart would have parked his car, overgrown lilac bushes that concealed the garden on the right side of the driveway. Each scene played out in her mind: the taxi drive with Benji Schapiro; Bart arriving home late and stepping out of his Caddy with a gun in his hand; Benji emerging from the bushes to stand behind the car, whispering, "Bart it's me, Benji, don't shoot." Walking toward his victim, Benji shoots bullet after bullet into his friend's body. Then Benji runs through the back yard to the alley and races down the lane to his house on the next street.

Placing the book on the floor, Sarah covered her face with her hands and rocked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

In the morning, Sarah called the Chicago information operator and asked for the number of the county building. She dialed the number, received the information she wanted, and that afternoon mailed off a check for \$10.00 and the date of her father's birth and death to the Cook County Coroner's office.

On Tuesday a thoughtful Sarah entered Carla's inner sanctum, aware that she was not going to discuss what she'd read in the Kefauver report until she had further information. That was new behavior. In the past, no matter what occurred, Sarah could barely sit down before sharing her latest grief.

She breathed deeply and said, "I've given my insecure childhood a lot of thought. It's no wonder I've always felt rejected. I was. Tossed back and forth between my mother and grandmother, transferred from one school to another — always the new kid in class. Left on a farm ..."

"It's difficult to feel safe and to trust your own perceptions when you have a history of loss and abandonment.

"But you also have a history of acceptance that needs to be counted, too," Carla said. "No one likes rejection. That's universal. If you craved it, you'd be a masochist. You mentioned changing schools frequently. It sounds as if you grew up in a military family. Why did your parents move so many times?"

"I'm not sure. I do remember that my mother wanted my father to sell his tavern and buy a hotel in Long Beach. We did move to Long Beach—that's when my mother

and I lived in a trailer. My father said, ‘I’ve got to go back to Hammond and tend to business,’ and he left my mother and me to fend for ourselves.

“There wasn’t as much chaos when my father was gone, but I missed him desperately. Then when we moved back to Hammond, and I’d hear my mother and father shout and scream at each other, I’d lie in bed and think, if my mother and father get a divorce and the judge asks me who I want to live with — I’d seen that in a Shirley Temple movie — I planned my reply: ‘I want to live with my grandmother.’ Until this moment, I thought I felt that way because I didn’t want to hurt my mother or my father’s feelings by choosing one over the other. Now I know better. Grandma meant safety.”

“Not hurting anyone’s feelings has been a major concern for you most of your life. Isn’t it time you considered not hurting your own?”

“My feelings were always so buried—until recently—I didn’t feel anything. It still takes me days to figure out what I feel.”

“It used to take you months. If it’s only days now, that’s real progress.”

Three weeks after Sarah had mailed ten dollars to the Cook County Coroner’s Office, she received a large manila envelope. She didn’t have to open it. She knew it contained a transcript of the coroner’s inquest investigating her father’s death.

Sarah carried it in from her mailbox, surprised at its weight. Settled in her rocker, she sliced open the envelope and removed ninety-five stenciled pages.

The first person to testify was Madeline, who said that she had called Mrs. Mindel to ask if Bart had arrived home and, “Mrs. Mindel hung up on me. Then I called Bart’s nephew, Zack, and asked if Bart was with him. I no sooner hung up than the phone rang

and I was surprised to hear Mrs. Mindel's voice. After all, she'd just hung up on me and had never called me in all the years I worked for her husband.

"She said, 'They got Bart,' and hung up again.

"I called the police and gave them Bart's address and told them 'to hi-tail it over there.' I waited a half hour or so and called back to the station and the police officer told me Bart was dead."

Q: "When did you last see the deceased?"

A: "Just prior to his death, maybe forty-five minutes or an hour earlier. When he left the Dog House he said, 'I'm just going down the street to check out a few things.'"

Q: "Was he carrying a gun?"

A: "No, sir, at least I didn't notice one."

Q: "As the manager of the premises known as Bart's Dog House, had you overheard any argument on the night of Mr. Mindel's death?"

A: "No, sir, no arguments."

Q: "Have you ever heard Mr. Mindel threatened with bodily harm?"

A: "No, sir, because he was always jolly and happy. He never argued with anyone."

Sarah held the page in her hand. To the public her father was jolly, but how fast his mood changed when he entered the house. Many times she'd overheard him shout at someone on the phone and give them hell.

Q: "Why did you call Mrs. Mindel on the night in question?"

A: "I was concerned . . . afraid something might have happened to him."

Q: "Why?"

A: “After that attempted hold-up in June, right at his house, I’d been concerned about his safety.”

Q: “During all the twenty-five years you worked for Mr. Mindel, do you know of any man or woman he antagonized, someone he might have quarreled with?”

A: “No, sir. He got along with everybody. He was a happy person, always joking, telling stories. He’d greet all his customers, ‘Hello, how are you?’ He was jolly with all of them.”

The pages on the floor were piling up. Sarah stopped reading long enough to go into the kitchen, where her tongue felt dry even after a glass of water.

When she resettled on her rocker, she read cousin Zack’s testimony.

Q: “Were you running any taverns for your uncle at the time of his death?”

A: “Well, I was looking after one or two since he’d been ill. He’d been to the doctor several times and was told to take it easy. I was keeping an eye out for him, at all of his places.”

Q: “Do you know of anyone to whom he had loaned money?”

A: “I do, but they were small amounts—fifty, a hundred dollars, a couple of hundred dollars.”

Sarah held firm to the page. Zack hadn’t mentioned the \$10,000 her father had lent to Benji Schapiro. She marked that answer in red and continued reading.

Q: “Did you ever hear your uncle make remarks about the loans?”

A: "He told me quite a bit about his business. He would say, 'Zack, so-and-so owes me money. If he comes in, put it away for me.'" "

Q: "You testified earlier that your uncle had seen a doctor?"

A: "Yes, he went to the doctor last December and was advised to take a rest; so he and my aunt went to Florida. At that time he asked me to keep an eye on his places. I said I would, but I got the impression that he intended to stay away, perhaps move away. That was my impression when he left."

Q: "You know that Mr. Mindel was shot at in June. Did he ever discuss that incident with you?"

A: "Yes, he told me that somebody was trying to stick him up."

Q: "Did he carry a lot of money on his person?"

A: "Prior to that attempted stick-up, he'd carry quite a bit of money—I would say four to five hundred dollars on his person."

Q: "What about in June, did he carry large amounts of money then?"

A: "No, because according to our conversation — I mean, he told me after the stick-up attempt that he was only carrying five or ten dollars. I'd been after him to do that since the stick-up attempt in 1947."

Q: "You mean he had been held up before?"

A: "Yes, that time they took his diamond ring. He was so pissed—sorry, I mean angry—he purchased a diamond twice as big to replace it. I was after him constantly. I'd say, 'Bart, don't wear that ring when you're out on the street. Carry it in your pocket.' He'd laugh at me and say, 'When am I supposed to wear it? When I'm home safe in bed?' He was a great joker, but after that attempt in June he didn't carry large amounts of money but he did continue wearing the diamond ring."

Q: “After the robbery attempt in June, did he make any other remarks?”

A: “Yes, Bart told me he drove over the front lawn and wrecked his car. In fact, he remarked something about how much damage there was and how much it would cost to repair it.”

Q: “He was sure it was a robbery attempt?”

A: “Yes, he said, ‘They probably thought I was carrying some of the receipts’ and that is all there was to the conversation. He laughed about it. He didn’t seem to take it very serious.”

Q: “Did they shoot at him that time?”

A: “Can I tell you from hearsay?”

Q: “Yes.”

A: “I heard there were three masked men, and one shot at him. My uncle never told me any of that.”

Sarah held the unread pages on her lap as the rocker creaked back and forth. She was suspicious of Zack’s testimony; it didn’t ring true. Of course Bart had confided in his nephew; he’d told Sarah about the “attempted robbery.” Bart was no fool. He’d taken that attempt on his life seriously or he wouldn’t have carried a gun—the same gun Zack had given to Bob. Sarah was certain Zack had lied under oath, but why?

Sarah pushed off the rocker with her foot. She rubbed her thumbnail back and forth across her upper lip until she knew, unequivocally, that Zack had lied. He’d reported “hearsay” to protect himself from further questioning.

Marking the “hearsay” portion of the transcript, Sarah read on. Bart had owned seven taverns, as the newspaper stated, but he’d only operated three at the time of his death. The other four were leased or subleased.

This was quite a chunk of reality to digest. Sarah stood up, placed the unread pages of the Coroner's Inquest on the rocker, and walked to her studio. Once there, she switched on the radio to find Connie Francis singing, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." With tears in her eyes, she turned off the radio before the song ended. She'd experienced that kind of coincidence before; this time it was a cruel joke. Her stress and anxiety were palpable, but Sarah returned to the living room to read on, driven by her need to know. Cousin Zack was still on the stand.

The stress of reading the testimony showed on Sarah's face, but she forced herself back to the living room. She felt compulsively driven to finish reading Zack's testimony.

Q: "In April of this year, your uncle bought oil leases. Is that correct?"

A: "Yes, there were about twenty of us in on that deal. It drew about \$450 a month for the largest share."

Q: "His share?"

A: "Yes, and mine, too."

"I had that share," said Mrs. Mindel, interrupting the proceedings. Her lawyer turned to her and said, "You will get your opportunity to tell it," and the questioner proceeded.

Q: "Did you know of any trouble with the oil lease?"

A: "None whatsoever. We were just, I would say, what you would call 'live ones,' because we didn't know too much about the business and we took a chance that we would hit oil. It was drilling in a recognized field, but it was drilling for discovery.

"In other words, my returns depended on just how lucky the drilling progressed. It wasn't wild-catting, but it was still quite a bit of discovery; so in order to drill, a major oil company will hold maybe fifty or sixty percent of the lease. Maybe they will buy the

entire lease from a farmer and if they didn't want to pay for the entire lease themselves, they'd dispose of forty-nine or forty-eight percent, so long as they kept control."

Sarah drew a red mark down the side of that paragraph. She remembered that the wells had gushed initially but then petered out, until her mother was receiving checks for less than twenty dollars. Elizabeth had moaned that Bart had lost \$100,000 on that investment, and had made a cutting remark about her husband the great "business man."

Sarah skimmed the next page about oil leases and oil talk and started reading closely again when Zack was asked if he and his uncle were close.

A: "Yes, sir, we saw each other almost daily."

Yeah, Bart saw more of Zack than he did of Sarah. She remembered how jealous she was when she realized Zack was the son Bart had always wanted.

Q: "Did your uncle have confidence in you?"

A: "Yes, as far as business matters and everything else."

It was obvious to Sarah that Zack knew a lot more than he'd been willing to reveal at the inquest. She was sure he'd known that Benji Schapiro had killed Bart, but was afraid if he fingered Benji and had him arrested, he, too, would be killed by the mob.

Q: "Back to that June attempt on Mr. Mindel's life. Did he have an opinion as to why he'd been shot at?"

A: “Bart was a jolly fellow, and when you spoke to him, it was always in a kidding manner, but I asked him if he really thought it was a hold up, and why he’d been shot at.”

Sarah noted an important ambiguity: earlier Zack had testified that it hadn’t been Bart who’d told him he’d been shot at by a masked man, and here, in this testimony, he’d admitted to that knowledge. The more Sarah read, the more objective she became. If she could find errors and contradictions in the testimony, why couldn’t the coroner? If the police had questioned Zack at length, or Benji, there was no record of it so far. Skittish but persistent, Sarah read on.

“Bart had been the target of robbery often, ten to twelve times, even when he owned an ice-cream parlor in Hammond. I was only a boy then, but he told me later he’d been held up in the ice-cream parlor three or four times when he was a young man and just starting in business. He was always leery about being held-up.”

Another contradiction, Sarah thought. Zack had testified that Bart didn’t take the June attempt seriously.

“My uncle used to laugh and say, ‘Why the hell am I constantly picked on for hold-ups? They must think I’m an easy mark.’”

Q: “Did the Hammond or Calumet City police ever apprehend anyone after these hold-ups?”

A: “Years ago someone was caught, but I don’t remember the case. I was a lot younger then.”

Sarah wondered how old Zack had been when he testified. Probably thirty-something, since he'd died of a heart attack before he was forty. Sarah had had such a crush on him when she was in grade school. Zack was as handsome as a movie star, with his pitch black hair and dark complexion.

Q: "Do you think that these continued hold-ups were perpetrated by the same person or persons who considered him an easy mark?"

A: "I always thought so — which I related to Bart. He always wore that diamond ring. He was sort of proud of the fact. I mean, that ring was a distinguishing mark with him; and contrary to what they tell in the paper, he had it insured, and in case it was stolen, the insurance company would either reimburse him for the full cost or give him a new ring of equal value.

"I constantly cautioned him that he made himself a target for hold-ups carrying around all that cash and wearing a flashy ring. He made himself an easy mark. He is a small fellow who carried a bunch of money and was out late at night."

Q: "Is there anything that you can tell the states attorney here or the police department that would give them any inkling or clue that might lead to a solution of this matter?"

A: "I am mystified; I can't think of a thing."

Liar! Zack knew a lot more. Sarah couldn't bear reading another sentence—at least not tonight. She prepared a hot chocolate to soothe herself to sleep, and went to bed.

In the morning she avoided looking at the testimony piled on the living room floor where she'd left it. Rather than deal with it again before work, she washed dishes, wiped down the stove top and refrigerator door, scoured the toilet, and wiped up the bathroom floor — anything to avoid the inevitable.

After work Sarah ate leftovers — creamed tuna on toast from the night before. Rinsing her dish at the sink, she knew she'd run out of excuses. Those pages were calling her.

She walked into the living room and knelt beside the two stacks of paper. Picking up one page, she read: "He was full of blood. . . ." She shuddered. Violence was an abomination. Sarah never watched a violent movie or read a book that contained violence, yet here she was about to read the hideous, atrocious violence perpetrated against someone she loved dearly.

Still kneeling, Sarah picked up the last page she'd read the night before to see who was testifying about blood. She scanned the page and realized Zack's testimony was finished. Now it was Uncle Ed, Bart's brother, who was answering questions. She picked up all the unread portion and settled into the rocker, thinking she was off *her* rocker to do this. She held the pages in her hands and she rocked, her eyes closed, as she tried to recapture what she knew about Uncle Ed.

Uncle Ed was the black-sheep of the Mindel family, the one who'd painted sparrows yellow and sold them for canary's during the Depression. She doubted that he'd be a man who could be relied on to tell the truth.

Were they all liars? Madeline, Zack, Ed? Not entirely. From reading Zack's testimony, she'd learned that Grandfather Mindel had emigrated from Austria, not Germany. That her father's given name was Bartholomew, not Bart. Neither her mother

nor her father had ever mentioned that. Zack testified that her father was forty-eight when he died, not forty-seven.

Sarah laid the pages back on the floor and dug out a paperback from the bookshelf titled, “3,500 Names for Baby.” She’d purchased it at the grocery store for sixty-nine cents, although she hadn’t a clue why she wanted it. Searching through the Bs she found “Bartholomew (Hebrew) biblical: One of the Twelve Apostles, Bart, Bartel, Barth” Her curiosity satisfied temporarily, she picked up the unread pages from the carpet once again and sat back down on the rocker to resume the hateful task she’d set for herself. She continued reading her uncle’s testimony.

“Madeline called me and I went to my brother’s house. He was laying next to the entrance of the garage. He was all full of blood, and laying with his face up. The scar (from the bullet) was visible on the side of his face and he was hardly recognizable in that pool of blood.

“A few minutes later Dr. Schultz — the family doctor — arrived on the scene. He’d been called by my sister-in-law, Mrs. Mindel. The doctor pronounced him dead.”

The next witness was Leonard Pulaski, the officer on duty that night.

“We called the coroner and he came out, and then the deputy sheriff. We investigated the premises for clues. After I talked to the dead man’s wife, I returned to the station. In the morning I called on neighbors to see if they had heard anything. Nobody gave me any information that would throw any light on the occurrence.

“A neighbor who lives directly across the street did tell me that he’d been reading the paper between two-thirty and three in the morning and he’d heard between ten and twelve rapid-fire shots.

“He said he raised his shade to look out and saw a black sedan parked in the street, parallel to the house, with its headlights out. He held his eyes on the car, which started out at a high rate of speed, drove south for about two hundred feet, without lights, then put the lights on and sped away.”

Q: “Did he see anyone enter the car?”

A: “No, sir.”

Q: “Did you question Mrs. Mindel?”

A: “Yes, I did.”

Q: “What did you learn from her?”

A: “She told me that she heard a noise outside, close to the garage, around the garage door. When she heard this noise, she got out of bed and looked through the kitchen window but didn’t see anything, because she didn’t have her glasses. She said she went back to the bedroom to find her glasses and when she returned she saw Bart laying there on the ground.”

The remaining pages dropped from Sarah’s hands. “My poor mother,” she moaned. “No wonder she had a breakdown. I can’t stand reading this, and she lived it.”

Sarah left the pages scattered on the carpet and began to rock, rock, rock in a rhythmic fashion.

The next night Sarah followed the same procedure: eating a light dinner after work, and then reading more of the police officer’s testimony.

Q: “Did you question Mrs. Mindel about whether she’d heard the shots or not?”

A: “Yes, I did. She said it didn’t sound like shots to her; it sounded more like a car backfiring.”

Q: “In the course of your investigation, have you learned of any motive for this assassination?”

A: “No, we haven’t. Tried pretty hard. We have been trying to get all the information we possibly can. We can’t find any motives, unless it was a stick-up.”

Q: “Did the victim have any money or jewelry on his person?”

A: “He had a diamond ring on his finger and about twenty-five dollars in his pants pocket.”

Q: “That is all. Thank you. I doubt very much such a vicious killing would be perpetrated for a stick-up.”

A: “That is the same doubt we all have. But we don’t have an actual motive in this case.”

Sarah culled the next few pages and learned that while her father had carried a gun, no shots had been fired from it; that his gun was found lying about six inches from his hand.

She reread the last page more intently and discovered that more than one police officer had testified and each one had contradicted the information given by the other.

Q: “Did the deceased have a diamond ring on his finger or money in his pocket?”

A: “I have a full report. As to the money—the money was thirty-eight dollars and seven cents. There was no ring on his person.”

The first night Sarah had read portions of the Coroner’s report, she’d been able to keep track of who asked the questions and who replied. But as her stress increased, night after night, so did her confusion. Who was testifying? Was it her mother’s attorney, Mr.

Asher? Was it the sergeant on duty *that* night? The coroner? Was her mind playing tricks?

Sarah finally concluded it didn't matter who testified. What mattered were the answers.

Q: "What kind of reputation did the deceased have in Calumet City?"

A: "Bart always had a good reputation. He was a very jovial sort of fellow, and he got along with everybody."

Q: "Was he ever connected with any places that ran gambling?"

A: "Never, no sir; he never was connected with any gambling or vice of any kind."

Q: "What sort of people patronized the places he ran?"

A: "Respectable, family people."

Q: "Knowing Bart Mindel, would you say, in the vernacular of the street, was he a 'tough guy?'"

A: "No, sir; he was a good fellow. As a matter of fact, he would shy away if any trouble came his way. He would avoid a fight in every way he possibly could."

Really confused now, Sarah retrieved pages from the carpet and checked back to see who the questioner was. She discovered it was her mother's attorney asking the police sergeant questions.

Q: "We know that the deceased carried a gun. The family thinks that the hold-up man—or men — saw him draw that gun and that's why they shot him. Do you think that is a reasonable conclusion?"

A: “Well, from the investigation I believe he walked out of the car with the gun in his hand.”

Q: “Officer, he was presumably shot from the shrubbery; was he not?”

A: “Yes, sir. We found two footsteps behind the shrubbery about fifteen to twenty feet away from his car.”

Q: “How many shots were fired?”

A: “Eight or nine, maybe ten or twelve. There were marks all around the garage and on the garage door.”

Q: “Were there powder burns on the body?”

A: “Yes, sir.”

Q: “Indicating that he was fired upon from close up?”

A: “Yes.”

Sarah laid what was left of the unread testimony in a neat pile on the carpet and rocked as her mind tried to take in the information. It was all so confusing. Then a pattern emerged: conflicting testimony was repeatedly given, but from what she’d read she knew that her father had been shot at close range, and that someone had been waiting for him behind the bushes. To her, it was further proof that Benji Schapiro had killed her father. But what about the neighbor’s testimony that a car was parked in the street? Maybe other members of the mob were there checking to see that Benji carried out his orders. Maybe they fired, too. That would explain the bullet holes in the garage door and the number of shots. A lot more bullets had been fired than the six wounds on the body indicated.

“Enough already,” as Glo and Roxy often said.

Thinking of Roxane, Sarah checked the time to see if it was too late to call. It wasn't, but she decided against it. She wasn't ready to discuss this with anyone. Not yet. Disturbed and anxious, Sarah picked up the unread pages and resumed reading.

The next witness called was Elizabeth. Dressed in black, she looked like a shadow as she sat in the witness chair, her hands neatly folded in her lap.

Q: "Did your husband have enemies?"

A: "No. He was the friendliest person; he thought everyone was his friend."

Q: "Did your husband always come home late in the morning?"

A: "His hours were irregular. He came home at nighttime at twelve, two, three, four, I never knew when, and when he did come home, he would be carrying large sums of money. I begged him not to. I begged him not to wear his ring at night. He wanted the shrubs cut down, but I said no."

Q: "When did he start carrying a gun?"

A: "After that hold-up attempt in June. May I speak freely?"

Q: "Yes, surely."

A: "When that attempted hold-up occurred, it was early in the evening, still light outside. I had the television on and I know the program, so it was about 7:30 P.M.

"Our house is insulated, you can't hear sounds from the outside if the windows are closed. I had just closed the windows because it was cold. Probably one was open a little; and suddenly, I heard in my ears — he hollered, 'ELLLLLLL!'

"I thought I must be dreaming; then I heard it again and I ran out the front door. His car was coming toward me, straight at me — I thought it was an accident because he rammed into the post.

“I stepped back. I thought we would both be killed, but God willed it that he just turned in time to get off the lawn, and I ran through the house to the back door, in slow motion, but I ran out the door, and saw the man with the gun. He wore a mask.

“I screamed and my neighbors came running out. I was so befuddled.”

Befuddled? The poor woman was only twenty-four hours away from a catatonic breakdown. In a way that breakdown was a blessing; who could live with that kind of memory? After her shock treatments, Elizabeth’s memory slowly returned, but with less intensity. There was no way of knowing how much she remembered from those terrible days; she was never willing — or able — to discuss the tragedy with Sarah.

Sarah was filled with sadness and compassion for her mother. She’d always avoided the subject of her father’s death for fear Elizabeth would have another nervous breakdown. Sarah longed to comfort her mother for all the grief and suffering she’d experienced.

The pattern of reading more of the testimony every night after dinner continued. Sarah shuddered and felt sick as she read more of her mother’s testimony.

A: “My husband was a helpless little man, that’s why he carried a gun. He was sensitive about his size. The newspapers said he was five foot, six. He was five foot, two. He was sensitive about it. I asked him why he didn’t shoot at the hold-up men to protect himself. He said, ‘Honey, I couldn’t hurt anybody.’”

Q: “Have you discussed this matter with the chief of police?”

A: “I don’t know the chief of police. I don’t mingle; I never go to my husband’s places. I was at home. Well, I mean I’m confused, I . . .”

Q: “Take it easy, Elizabeth,” he lawyer cautioned. “Did your husband have a license for his gun?”

A: “I told him to. I said, ‘Get a license for your gun — do it this way according to the law. Do it for me — and to protect yourself. Don’t sputter like a dummy and have these goons shoot you like a rat when they are the rats. If you do get a gun, get it in the proper manner and use it only for one purpose — to protect your life.’

“My doctor—I tell you this because I was very ill and several of them said, ‘You shouldn’t tell him to get a gun,’ but one doctor said, ‘Yes, rats like that who rob and murder aren’t worth living.’ I think that they should be dead, and if it happened to me, like the doctor said, ‘I would kill him.’”

Sarah could sense the confusion in her mother’s testimony. She paused from her reading long enough to light a cigarette and think. Elizabeth felt a lot of guilt because she’d encouraged her husband to carry a gun and use it if he had to.

A fragment of information tumbled around in Sarah’s head. The night before the funeral, Aunt Esther had told her, “Your parents argued the last time she saw him alive. Your mother swore at him and said, ‘If you’re shot, I wouldn’t hold your hand on your death bed. I’ve had it, I’m fed up. I want to move away from here. Now.’” If that were true, Elizabeth had more reasons than one to feel guilty.

As Sarah reread her mother’s testimony, something she’d missed stood out. Elizabeth had been asked to examine Bart’s gun, but she was unable to identify it.

Q: “So, you encouraged your husband to carry a gun?”

A: “He always protected me from all the hard things of life. He liked to be home—he was a home man. He wouldn’t say, ‘Here is a gun,’ so how could I identify it?

Many times I looked him in the eye and said, ‘Honey, never use this gun wrong. This is just to protect yourself.’ He promised me.

“He was frightened, I think. He left the gun home during the day, but at night, when he came home at those irregular hours, naturally anyone would be afraid coming ...”

Elizabeth was questioned by the coroner, the deputy, her attorney, and periodically she’d raise her voice hysterically and Mr. Asher would counsel her to keep silent until she regained control. Elizabeth closed her eyes briefly, but the deputy continued questioning her without let up.

Q: “Were you familiar with your husband’s business?”

A: “Not from a standpoint of being in the place and acting as a worker or bookkeeper, but from time to time, as any husband would, he told me about transactions. His objective in life was to buy run-down businesses, build them back up, and then sell them.”

Q: “Did he own all of his places?”

A: “The Dog House, he had his managers, but he owned it outright. There he wasn’t in partnership; he did things alone. In other places he was in equal partnerships. He was always decorating the places and building up business.”

Q: “Were there any places he owned and operated that were leased to others?”

A: “Wait a minute; I am not a businesswoman. I can’t answer this question. My husband was the businessperson. He had the personality. He knew how to get along with people. That is why he had so many friends.”

Q: “When you were aroused on the morning of September 15, what occurred?”

A: “I am under the doctor’s care, and I take a very mild sedative, which, the last two days, haven’t worked at all, but that night I slept as sound as if I were the one that was shot.

“I am usually a light sleeper, and alert because I was at home alone most nights. I heard the car door slam and I was waiting for his footsteps — that’s how indistinct it was; and I couldn’t find my glasses.

“I could give further details as to where I found them (the glasses) or where I put them, but I couldn’t find my glasses or even see them. I didn’t know where I was; but when I heard the noise, I flashed a bright light that is on the terrace, which lights up the back yard, which shows far along the house, but I saw nothing.

“I went around the house . . . it’s big, and it has angles, it is not just a straight line. I couldn’t find my glasses. I heard noises, like a rustle of leaves and then a bang of a car, I didn’t know what. I found my glasses in a dresser drawer, and thought, ‘Gee! He must be home,’ and I . . .”

Unable to read further, Sarah went to bed, where she tossed and turned half the night.

CHAPTER 51

“You look pale, Sarah. Are you ill?” Carla asked.

“I’ve been nauseous for the last week.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“No, I know what’s ailing me. I’m reading the coroner’s report from my father’s murder.”

“That takes courage, but why are you forcing yourself to read that painful material?”

“I have to.”

“Why do you have to?”

“Despite the heartache, I have a compulsion to know, with certainty, why my father was killed and by whom. I want to be done with this grief and stop torturing myself. I’ve become aware that my father’s death doesn’t torment me with the same intensity. It’s my mother’s testimony that really gets to me. I have such compassion for her.” That said, Sarah’s tears began and she wiped them away with tissue. “I’ve stayed numb while I read, or I couldn’t have dealt with it at all. Now my feelings are so blocked, I’m not sure what I feel. I need your help to sort it out.”

“You said you felt compassion for your mother. That’s a beginning. It’s a long-delayed reaction.”

“I had compassion for her when she was hospitalized after my father’s death. After her recovery — she never really recovered — she treated me with such contempt that my feelings of love for her got covered over with hurt and resentment. I haven’t had

a phone call from her for a couple of weeks, and that's allowed me time to feel for her anguish. I know if she called this afternoon and banged my ear with her complaints and put-downs, my good feelings for her would disappear. So, how real are they? If she would just stay out of my face — or if I could move so far away she couldn't phone me — perhaps then I'd have time to sort out my feelings and forgive her."

"You're right about distancing yourself. It would do you good, both physically and emotionally."

"I moved as far away from her as I could—from Illinois to California—but the distance hasn't helped. There's no escaping her mouth!"

"That's because you've internalized her critical messages. You cart them along with you no matter where you live; whether you talk to her or not."

"All I ever wanted was her love and respect. She still treats me like a three year old she can abandon or smother with her neediness. Sometimes I feel I never want to see her again, and the next minute I'm remembering something pleasant like the time she and I lived in a trailer, parked in Long Beach. These conflicted feelings tear me apart. Will I ever be free of her?"

"You may always tense up when you hear your mother's voice, but with the understanding you've gained in therapy, one day, no matter what outrageous thing she says or does, you'll be able to let her words go in one ear and out the other. I seriously doubt that your mother will ever change; she's locked into a set pattern of rigidity and denial. What you say or do has little or no effect on her behavior toward you. I know it's difficult to remember that she has a personality disorder, especially when you feel the brunt of her attacks. Being raised by a mother afflicted with this kind of illness has left you without a sense of identity. In therapy your individuality has grown by leaps and

bounds. When you once again feel secure you will no longer be rattled or threatened by her. As your self-esteem grows, you'll be able to let go of hoping and wishing that she'll change and be there for you. I may be wrong—miracles do happen—but the way you've described her abusive treatment of you, it's very, very doubtful. One day you'll accept her limitations and move on—with or without her.”

That evening Sarah resumed reading the coroner's report, determined to finish the miserable task before she went to bed; there were only ten or eleven pages left.

At the conclusion of testimony on page ninety, Sarah read:

“All right, we shall proceed to close now. Dr. Lawrence Beatty of the coroner's staff made an examination of the dead body of Bart Mindel and he says, ‘In my opinion, death was the result of multiple bullet wounds: head, chest, and neck.’ “

Sarah threw that page and the rest of the report across the room, jumped up, lit a cigarette, and wandered from room to room as she had the morning of Bart's murder.

The following Tuesday, in therapy, she said, “I felt as if I were going crazy. I kept pacing back and forth like a caged animal. I'd read that description of my father's wounds to his head, neck, and chest and I knew why his casket had been sealed. I wish I could seal that description and never think of it again.

“Before I could force myself to read the final statement I soaked in a hot tub, trying to understand what I'd read. For one thing, Benji Schapiro, the syndicate man who murdered my father, was never called as a witness. If those proceedings had been on the up and up, it stands to reason that one of the last persons to see my father alive would have been called to testify.

“I’m grateful that bastard Benji is dead. If he were still alive, I’d probably reopen the case and get myself killed in the process.”

Sarah lowered her head and held her face in her hands. When she finally sat up, Carla asked, “What was the conclusion of the coroner’s inquest?”

“I’ve memorized it: ‘From the testimony presented, we, the jury, are of the opinion that the above described occurrence was murder, and we recommend that the police continue their search for the said unknown assailant or assailants, and when apprehended, that they be held to the grand jury on a charge of murder until released by due process of law.’

“When I finished reading that, I was raging with anger. The police never investigated. In a fury I tore up every page and dumped them in the sink to burn. I didn’t ever want to see that coroner’s report again. After I burnt all the pages, I felt purged, as if the burden I’d carried more than half my life had been lifted. I finally know with certainty who killed my father and why.

“But now I’m afraid I’ll slip back into depression. I feel such grief and sadness: for my mother, and for my father, who died at the hand of a so-called friend. The horror he must have felt seeing that gun in Benji’s hand. Sarah lowered her eyes and added, “At least he didn’t suffer physical pain; he must have died instantly.”

Carla shoved the tissue box toward Sarah and she emptied it, wiping her tears, blowing her nose and sniffing.

Back in her apartment, Sarah was sure it had been worth all the years of suffering. She’d kept her promise and vindicated her father. “Let go, let go. It’s over. OVER!” She felt a sense of release and freedom pervaded her body. She felt lighter. Her days of mourning were over. She at last free to live her own life.

By Friday, she felt ready for companionship and dialed Jack's number. When she heard his familiar voice, she said, "I know it's short notice, but I'd love to see you tonight."

"It's your lucky day, Sarah. See you around 7:00."

Promptly at 7:00 Sarah heard a knock on her door and, amazed that Jack was arriving on time for once, she opened the door wide with a big smile of greeting. She was shocked to see a stranger inside the screen door leering at her. His look was so evil she could practically smell it and she began closing the door, even before asking him what he wanted.

Before she had the door completely shut, the man moved forward in a flash and jammed his shoe in the space that remained between the door and doorjamb.

Reacting instantly, Sarah opened the door wide and slammed it hard against his foot. His shoe still between the door and frame. She heard him crash backward against the plants on the outside landing. Hearing his moans, she let up the pressure and he removed his foot, still moaning as she closed and locked the door.

Sarah heard him curse and called out through the closed door, "What do you want?"

He hesitated, cleared his throat, and said, "Wa, what time is it?" She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Rushing to the phone she dialed Jeff's number and her neighbor rushed across the empty courtyard. There was no sign of the intruder, but the broken plants on the doorstep proved his existence.

When Jeff knocked on Sarah's door, she refused to open it until he had assured her that he really was Jeff and that the weirdo was nowhere in the vicinity.

Jeff hugged and comforted her, and encouraged her to call the police. Over an hour later a uniformed officer arrived. After hearing the details, he said, “I advise you to move. This neighborhood is changing rapidly. Only last week a thug stuck a shotgun in a car window, demanding money from a young couple sitting in their car in front of the building next door.”

“I can’t afford to move.”

“Then don’t open your door without asking who’s there,” the cop said. “Have your landlord check all the window locks, especially since you’re on the ground floor, facing the street. Sorry I can’t be of more help, but we’ve had a rash of calls like this. That’s why it took me so long to respond to yours. I’ve got to get going now.”

Jeff followed the officer to the door. “I’m sorry, Sarah,” he said, “but I have to leave, too. I’m expecting an important call from New York.”

Fifteen minutes later Sarah heard another knock on the door and nervously called out, “Who is it?”

“Who the hell were you expecting?” Jack shouted back. “Open up the door, already.”

That was Jack. For sure. Still cautious, Sarah opened the door slowly and Jack, seeing her expression, said, “Hey Baby, what’s going on? You look like you’ve just had an unexpected visit from your mother.”

“You’d know, if you arrived on time,” Sarah responded, sarcasm curling her lips.

“You’re pretty feisty tonight, Sarah. Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“Yeah, sure. Sorry. When you hear what happened, you’ll understand.”

Jack listened to Sarah’s detailed report, but he had no sympathy for her. “So, big deal!” he said. “That happens in the ghetto every night.”

“How do you know? You don’t live in a ghetto, but I do. Besides, you’re twice as big as I am, and a man. No one can rape you!”

“I wasn’t born to the good life like you. I was raised in a ghetto and now that you live in one, you’d better get street-wise before it’s too late.”

Jack sounded more like Ralph than himself. In the past, Sarah could depend on his sympathetic concern. Tonight she looked at him as if she’d never seen him before.

Softening his reproach, Jack reached for Sarah and gave her a big hug. “Come on, Baby, it’s over and you’re safe.”

Was Sarah in Jocko’s arms or Ralph’s? She couldn’t tell the difference.

Jack walked into the kitchen, opened the cabinet under the sink, and retrieved *his* bottle of Gallo. He poured wine into two water glasses, handed one to Sarah, and said, “I’ve got some big news of my own. I’m getting married next month. You were right; when I was ready for a committed relationship, I found one.”

Sarah’s heart did a double flip, but she managed a weak smile and toasted Jack’s happiness. The conversation was strained for the next hour, and Jack was prepared to leave before midnight. At the door he said, “I’ll bring Ruth Anne over to meet you as soon as she returns from visiting her family in Phila.” He buzzed Sarah’s cheek, and she closed the door behind him.

Sarah plunked down on the rocker and rocked. All her doors were closing. The apartment wasn’t safe anymore, and Jack was getting married. How different her life had turned out—nothing like her expectations. She and Bob were supposed to grow old together, surrounded by family and friends, enjoying their grandchildren. Sarah’s loneliness seemed to penetrate to her bones, and once again she pondered her future.

Sarah accepted the fact that she had only one meaningful goal: the book about Bart. There had to be a way to find time to write it. If she didn’t have to pay such high

rent — last June the apartment complex had been sold and her rent was being increased by \$75.00 a month. She'd reluctantly paid the increase, but had refused to sign a new one-year lease, insisting on a month-to-month contract. Intuitively, she'd known then that she'd have to move.

But where? She no longer felt safe in this neighborhood, and an apartment in a less expensive area could be far worse. She could sell her car and the extra cash would supplement her income but she wouldn't get much for a beat-up Pontiac. Bob still sent her a hundred dollars a week, but where could she possibly live on \$400 a month?

Tossing and turning in bed an hour later, Sarah mulled over that question. She finally fell asleep around 3:00 A.M. and dreamt she was piloting a plane and all the passengers on board were reading her book-length novel.

In the morning, rather than dressing and rushing into her studio as she did every Saturday, Sarah dialed Roxane's number. "Good morning," she said. "I have another favor to ask. Please give me the phone number of that actress friend of yours who lived in Ireland. She told me she wrote a book when she lived there."

"I can give it to you, sweetie," Roxy laughed, "but unless you want to make a toll call to England, it won't do you much good. Paula's playing the lead in the London production of *You Can't Take It with You*. She'll be abroad 'til the first of the year. I expect she'll call me one of these days. Is there anything I can ask her for you?"

"Maybe you have the answers I'm looking for. When Paula was your house guest, did she ever discuss living in Ireland?"

"Boy, did she ever! She raved about her three months in Dublin and the Abbey Theater until I was bored to death. I thought if she mentioned that place again, I'd pop her. So, what's on your mind?"

“While you were on the phone with your ex, Paula told me about the beauty of the Irish countryside and how warm and welcoming the Irish were. I wanted to ask her for more details. I may have misunderstood her, but I thought she said that the Irish government provides free housing for artists. It may be a crazy idea, but I wanted to check it out because I have to move. Someone tried to break into my apartment last night.”

“That’s heavy, what happened?”

Once again Sarah repeated all the details of the attempted break-in. “You’re absolutely right,” Roxanne said, “it’s imperative you move to a safer neighborhood—the sooner the better. From listening to Paula’s endless rhapsodizing about Ireland, I picked up a few facts. The Irish government doesn’t charge artist’s any tax, but there’s no free housing. Just to be sure, why don’t you call the Irish Tourist Bureau? I’m sure they have an office in L.A.”

On Monday, Sarah called the L.A. branch of the Irish Tourist Bureau and requested brochures; they arrived three days later and she devoured the contents. Reading descriptions of charming thatched cottages, she daydreamed, visualizing herself sitting at her typewriter, a peat fire warming her soul, a black Irish setter sitting at her heels.

At her next therapy session, Sarah fairly bounced into Carla’s office and announced, “I’ve made a couple of major decisions. One, I’m dropping my first name. From now on I’m calling myself René — that’s my middle name. I want to celebrate my changes. Besides, René will look better on a book cover than Sarah! Sarah’s so folksy. René has more class and sophistication—just like me! Wow! Listen to what I just said. It actually sounded like I meant it. Damn it, I do.”

“It’s wonderful to see you like this, Sarah—oops, René. Your vitality has always impressed me. Even in your darkest hour, you’ve had the inner strength to face your obstacles, move on, and grow. One of your most endearing qualities is your willingness to listen, learn, and change your behavior. You did mention more than one decision. What others have you made?”

“I’m moving to Ireland. There I can live on the cheap, and not have to work at some dumb job. Then I’ll have the time to write my book. I didn’t mention last week that I’d sent for brochures. But now that I’ve read them, I know that I can cash in a couple of CDs and live on that for a year. When I leave your office, I’m heading directly to a travel agent and I’ll make reservations. I want to leave in about six weeks.”

“Why so soon?”

“Carl Sandburg, or somebody, said, ‘I can grow old or I can get old.’ I want to celebrate my fiftieth birthday in another time and place. My first fifty years have been hell. I want my next fifty — well, probably not another fifty — but whatever life I have left I want to live and grow to the fullest. It’s how I live, not how long I live that matters. I’ve dreamed about living in Europe since I discovered foreign countries in my coloring books. Ireland’s not Europe, but it’s close enough to satisfy that dream. And if I finish my book before my money runs out, I could tour the continent.”

For the next forty-five minutes, René and Carla discussed the pros and cons of the decision. René concluded by saying, “I need time to think on what I’ve learned about myself in the last four years. I’ve never grown so fast in my whole life. I know there will be more therapy in my future, but for now I want time off. I hope you won’t think I’m making a big mistake stopping my therapy.”

“On the contrary, I’m pleased. You have grown and changed. You’ve worked harder in therapy than any client I’ve ever had. I know you’ll write a wonderful book,

and writing it will be a new kind of therapy. You'll share your knowledge and your wealth of insights. I hope you'll send me a copy when it's published."

"A copy! More than that, your name will be included in the acknowledgments; without your support and wisdom, I would never have reached this place—with enough confidence in myself to make this decision.

"But publishing, that's too wild a dream to consider. For now, my goal is to write the book, for me. Later, if anyone wants to read it, that will be an unexpected plus."

"You have the right attitude, René; it's the process, not the results."

At the door René said, "If I didn't need to save money for the trip, I'd continue to see you until I left, but as it is, this will have to be good-bye. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too, but to paraphrase Buddha, 'Therapy is like a raft, once you cross the river you no longer need the raft.'"

CHAPTER 52

René strode into the Beverly Hills Holiday Travel and asked the young travel agent at the first desk, “Would it be less expensive to buy a round-trip ticket to Ireland with an open return, or purchase two one-way tickets?”

René slid onto the seat offered and repeated her question.

“An open-dated return ticket is the most expensive,” the agent replied “Two one-way tickets are expensive, too. Your best bet is to purchase a round-trip ticket and pick some return date. Then, if you want to extend your trip, you’ll only pay a fee for changing the date.”

“Okay,” René said, grinning. “I want to purchase a round-trip ticket to Dublin, Ireland. Book me for Thursday, December 6th with a return on January 5th, 1980. I’d like to pick up my tickets next week.”

Another forty-five minutes passed before the arrangements were completed. René left the office with her back straight and her head held high. If this was what confidence and self-esteem felt like, she liked it. In fact, she relished it.

Her only confidant for the next week was her friend, Roxane, who encouraged her. “You’re special. You have special talents and now you’ll use them. It’s time you lived up to your potential.”

René’s weeks, no longer punctuated by her appointments with Carla, were now filled with plans for her departure. Each evening, as she crossed off another date on her

calendar, she felt closer to the fulfillment of her dreams. This trip, and writing her book, had become her new obsessions. This goal would be her salvation.

At least once a day, sometimes twice, she would open her top desk drawer and fondle her Air Lingus tickets to prove to herself that the trip was not a fantasy.

On the fifth of November she gave notice at work, and her boss, always concerned with saving money said, "It's slow around here. Just come in tomorrow to clean out your desk and make that your last day."

René had counted on at least another week's pay. She'd given notice for two, but she was delighted to have extra time to prepare for her trip and didn't fret about the loss of income.

On Thanksgiving she called the boys to wish them a happy day, and told them her plans. Johnny greeted her announcement with enthusiasm. He wished her luck and promised to call to say good-bye before her phone was disconnected.

After hearing the details, Josh responded, "I'm really glad you told me, Mom. You're not as naïve as I thought. Maybe now I can stop worrying about you."

"You called me Mom! That felt good." Josh had stopped calling her Mom on his eighteenth birthday.

"Maybe we're both growing up!" Josh laughed. "You know you're living my dreams. I've always wanted to live in Europe."

"Well, I hope you won't have to wait as long as I have to fulfill them. By the way, I have some news that will definitely please you. You've been bugging me for years to stop smoking. Well, I've made an appointment with my therapist for the week before I leave. She'll hypnotize me, and I'll be able to stop smoking. God only knows how much cigarettes cost in Ireland. This way I'll save the money I've been wasting for too many years."

“I wish you’d stop smoking for your health, but if it’s for the money, so be it. The fact that you’ll finally stop does please me. But I hate to see you give up on your art—you’re a terrific artist. How do you know you can even write, let alone create a novel?”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. You know I hate homilies, but that one definitely fits the bill. If I don’t risk it, I’ll never know.”

After that conversation René questioned her decision. Was she making a mistake? Should she cancel her reservations?

Rummaging through a desk drawer, René located an unused tape, placed it into the cassette player, and turned on the device. She spoke into the mini-microphone and poured out her deepest fears about the trip. Then she rewound the tape and listened to her words, in an objective way, as a therapist would. She rewound the tape for the second time and while listening, asked herself why she was taking this risk and what was she trying to prove?

Reassured, René concluded that she had nothing to lose and much to gain. She would live in Ireland, no matter what. Besides, she could die in Ireland and wouldn’t have to face the problems of earning a living until she returned to the states.

René was tickled that she’d discovered a replacement for Carla—her tape recorder—and scribbled, “tape deck and half a dozen tapes” to her list of items to pack.

Taking a “tea-break,” she daydreamed of living in a thatched cottage and relaxing after writing her daily quota of ten pages. Filled with new resolve, she dialed Gloria’s phone number. Prepared for Glo’s “hee-haw” when she heard about the planned adventure, René was pleasantly surprised when she received an unexpected response: “That’s a terrific idea. I always said you had a way with words. But why do you have to leave the country to write your book? Are you into another fantasy trip?”

Early the following morning, still wearing her nightgown, René opened the front door a crack and groped in the mailbox with one hand. She retrieved a letter, closed the door, and checked the return address. It was her old Vanderville address. Thank God. Her weekly check from Bob had finally arrived—a week late, as usual.

With a sense of relief, René realized that after December 6th it would be Josh who received her checks and banked them. For one whole splendiferous year, she wouldn't have to fret about Bob's check arriving late or be reminded that Bob and Lorraine existed. And when she returned after a year's adventure, she'd have a \$12,000 "nest egg."

Slitting open the envelope with her forefinger, René removed an embossed note card. *MRS. ROBERT D. SHALLOT* was printed in italics at the top. Her old "logo" rattled her and she fumed, "Lorraine, you petty bitch! You probably found a box of my old stationery and couldn't wait to mail this!"

Insight turned her irritation to laughter. There was still a Mrs. Shallot in Vanderville who waited on and toted for Bob. She, too, probably had to fight for an "allowance" and listen to Bob bitch about every expense. Nothing in Vanderville had changed; another foolish woman was doing Sarah's old work while René had a life of her own and planned to live it with gusto.

Belly-laughing until she had to blow her nose and wipe her eyes, René felt reborn and decided that now was the time to change her last name. No way was she going to make that bastard's name — Shallot — famous. She thought of Alice asking Humpty-Dumpty, "Must a name mean something?" And his reply: "Of course it must. My name means the shape I am..."

Remembering a tune from childhood, she hummed, "I'm gonna change my way of living . . . change the way I strut my stuff." Picking up a copy of *The Name Game*,

she skimmed boy's names, searching for a new last name. She scribbled, Howard, Wayland, Jotham on a tablet, but the names didn't feel right. Then she realized that her passport read: S. René Shallot, that her ticket was ordered for René Shallot, and that she didn't have time to change her passport, or the time or money to change her name legally. "So be it," she muttered. She'd have lots of time in Ireland to find herself a new last name. And when she returned to the States, she could change her name legally before her book was published. Still not satisfied, she picked up *3,500 Names for Baby*. She could find no listing for "René." In the book it was spelled Renee: "French. Reborn." Perfect, she thought, but rather than add an E to her name, she decided to use an accent. She wrote René in large, flowing script. Now that has class. Satisfied that she had marked her changes, she wrote Mrs. Robert D. Shallot on a scrap of paper, and with a great sense of joy and release, she knew she was finally free of Bob. Knowing that she would never sign her name that way again, she dropped the scrap of paper in the waste basket, on top of Lorraine's embossed card.

On impulse, she retrieved the scrap and note card and tore the papers into tiny shreds, dropping them in an over-sized ash tray. Then she struck a match to the remnants and watched the paper curl and burn. She used a whole book of matches before the last scorched scrap of her married name turned to ash.

Still unsatisfied, she dumped the ashes into an empty wide-necked carafe and then filled it with water. She watched the ash sink to the bottom. "Now I've drowned them both," she laughed. Feeling satisfaction, she printed I HAVE URNED MY FREEDOM on a mailing label and stuck the label onto the carafe. She placed the "urn" on the window sill and watched a sunned rainbow play on the glass.

With phone rates lower on Sunday, René dialed Louise's number, fully expecting Lou to object to her plans. Rather than discouragement, Louise was positively delighted.

“Do it! Do it for me and all the housewives of America. Tell it like it is — cooped up in the house with the kids, day after lousy day, with the same husband, the same fights.

Nothing ever changes for me. But everything’s changed for you. Do it!”

Shirley, when told of René’s plans, said, “You’ve got guts. You’re adventurous. You have a way of taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary—that’s a plus for any writer.”

“But I’m not a writer. Not yet.”

“A writer is someone who writes, and you’ve been doing that for years. As one writer to another, you’ve got what it takes. Save a copy for me.”

The word, “writer” tasted sweet on René’s lips, as sweet as the word “artist” ever had. Feeling good about herself, René took another risk and dialed her mother’s number.

After hearing René’s plans, Elizabeth commented, “You’ll probably change your mind.” Then she changed the subject back to herself.

When René could not tolerate one more minute of listening to Elizabeth’s whining monologue, she said, “Someone’s at the door,” and hung up. Of course, there was no one at the door. René had finally used Elizabeth’s ploy when someone told her something she didn’t want to hear. What René needed was positive feedback, so she dialed Jack’s number. When he answered on the first ring, she said, “How would Ruth Anne feel about you and I meeting for lunch, alone? I have something to tell you.”

“God, René, Ruth Anne and I aren’t fused at the hip. We’re individuals. Of course, she won’t mind. She liked you when I introduced you two at the wedding, and she knows we’re good friends. What’s up anyway? No bad news, I hope.”

“No, Jack, my news is wonderful.”

René crossed off another date on her calendar, and had x'd out five more before she met Jack at the deli on Fairfax Street. He arrived only a few minutes after she was seated. René was positively delighted at his promptness.

Jocko pecked René on the cheek and whispered, "What's a nice black boy like me doing in a Jewish deli?" She whispered back, "Be sure to order the black corned beef, the red is only for Indians."

Munching their corned beef on rye, and laughing between bites, René shared her news and said, "This is like old times. We've had a lot of laughs over the years."

"Like old times? Maybe, but with a difference. Now I'm married."

"Change must take four years, Jack—four years of high school, four years of college, four years to find myself. When you met me, Jack, I was a walking nervous breakdown."

"Yeah. So, now that you've got your act together, no telling what'll happen next. Watch out Ireland, here comes René. Just remember, I knew you when! You can change your name another dozen times, but you'll still have a great personality. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too."

Jack pushed back his chair, stood, walked to René's side, kissed her on the cheek and said, "I'm so proud of you." Returning to his chair, he said, "When we first met, you sat with your feet glued together, your hands in fists. You were so intense, sometimes you scared me. Now, here you sit, relaxed, leaning back in your chair, telling me you're about to change your whole lifestyle again. Jesus, you're like a cat. How many lives have you already lived? Five or something!" Jack whistled low, just the way Bart once had when he was impressed.

René grinned, “I think life is an amusement park and we all pick our rides at birth. My life has been one long ride on the roller coaster. Maybe we’re all just wind-up toys God plays with for his amusement.”

“That sounds like Sarah’s old cynicism.”

“It may have sounded cynical, but I really am full of hope. I’m changing my ride.”

“Well, Sarah, I mean René,” Jack laughed, “don’t pick the merry-go-round, it’s boring and the spinning will make you sick! There’s so much depth and power in you; choose the ride that fits you best. How about the parachute? You’re always jumping off. This way you’ll land safely.”

“Nah, that’s no good. I’m afraid of heights,” René laughed. “All kidding aside, Jack, in Ireland I’m sure I’ll find solitude, not the loneliness I experienced in L.A. I’ll keep searching for truth and, if I’m lucky, I’ll find some. No. Forget that. The search for truth is endless. Maybe the only truth is that there is none.

“I find life tragic and absurd. Reality hurts. Yet, in moments of clarity, I can live with the nonsense and live each day as though my actions are important. Ultimately, nothing means anything and everything means something.”

“And you accused me of talking in parables.”

“You do, Jack. That’s why I’ve learned so much from you. That’s why we understand each other. . . love each other. I do love you, Jack. . . agape love. Without your love, support, and direction, I would have folded completely that first year on my own.”

“René,” Jack said, his tone serious, “I do love you. No matter where you go, or when you come back, I’ll be waiting for your return.”

That night René studied the map of Ireland once again. She knew she wanted to live near water and mountains. She located an area on the map called Connemara that had both. Checking in her Ireland travel guide, she read: "... the most beautiful scenery in the world . . . the clearest water. The sunlight on the mountains is breathtaking."

Once more she located Connemara on the map, closed her eyes, pressed one finger to the map, opened her eyes, lifted her finger, and squinted to read the finely printed name, LEENANE.

"THAT'S IT! Tomorrow I'll call 'Veronica' and ask her to make a reservation for a thatched cottage in Leenane.

René x'd off another date and counted the remaining days. With only two weeks until her departure, she knew she had to get serious about packing up her apartment.

CHAPTER 53

Unsmiling, René retrieved cardboard boxes from the front stoop. She wanted to be flying to Ireland today, not collecting boxes from the grocery store and packing most of them for storage.

She heard the radio D.J. in the background talking drivel, and she was about to switch him off, when lively music caught her attention. The strong beat revived her energy and she wiggled her hips, shook her shoulders, and skip-danced into the kitchen to run off the whistling kettle.

An hour later René removed a large brown plastic garbage bag from the locked storage in the garage and pulled it across the cement to the back door. Pulling the overstuffed bag across the kitchen floor, she dragged it into the living room and plopped it near the bay window, determined to finally throw away the contents.

When Johnny had picked up the garbage bag from his father and mailed it to her in a packing box, she'd thought Bob had finally coughed up with her share of the Great Books. She'd been living in San Pedro about a year when the box arrived, and was eager to investigate. She'd poked one hand inside the bag and removed one of Bob's old love letters. Furious, she'd resealed the garbage bag and buried it at the back of a closet.

Now she pushed the plastic bag over on its side and emptied a third of the contents on the carpet. No more holding onto this old shit. She'd be damned if she'd pay to store old love letters. With both hands she scooped up the top layer and spread the hodgepodge in a thin layer across the carpet.

To her amazement René discovered treasures that had been missing for years. Dance cards from high school, letters from boys named Jim and Sherm, who had written to her while they served their country in World War II.

She walked back to the kitchen and dragged in a large empty garbage can and dumped those items, feeling only a little regret. Next, she fingered a dance recital program, noted her name listed for a solo, and hummed, “Three little fishes, in an itty bitty pool.” Laughing, she threw it away. A dried gardenia corsage tied with pink ribbon, from her first prom, crumbled when she tossed it in the can and completely disintegrated when she tossed a theater program from *Oklahoma* on top of it.

Fingering a fourth-grade report card, René was amazed at the A’s and A+’s next to every subject. Now that she knew she was dyslexic, she wondered how she’d managed to receive such high marks. “I’m like AVIS,” she laughed, “I try harder.” Unwilling to part with this proof that she had never been stupid, as Bob had always implied, René placed the report card in a “SAVE” pile. She also saved her purple-lined diploma’s from grade school and high school, her class ring, and Girls Club pin. The “SAVE” pile seemed to be growing higher than her throw-aways in the garbage can.

Stiff from sitting cross-legged, her knees ached. Changing position to hunch back on her heels, a paper lace valentine caught René’s attention. She opened the red-hearted card and grinned at the signature, remembering how thrilled she’d been when she was the only girl in sixth grade to receive a valentine from an eighth grader. She placed the valentine on her “SAVE” pile and then, reminding herself that she had to be ruthless, threw it in the garbage.

Scooping out another pile from the garbage bag, an Indian head nickel fell out of an envelope and rolled on its edge across the carpet. René knelt and stretched out her

hand to retrieve it. She tucked the nickel into her sweater pocket, delighted that this item, at least, demanded no vacillating indecision.

Next, she investigated a dirt-smeared, dog eared, eight by ten manila envelope and, removing the contents, discovered art work that somehow had been preserved since fourth grade. Her favorite among the treasured Crayola and water-colored drawings was a young girl skipping beside a lamb. She sing-songed “Mary had a little lamb,” and wondered if the lambs in Ireland would look as soft and white.

René remembered receiving her first dime-store watercolor set for her ninth birthday and how delighted she’d been that the colors included gold and silver. She was still partial to those brilliants. No way could she discard what remained of her early art work. She placed the items lovingly in a fresh file folder and tossed out the old manila envelope.

The next scoop from the brown bag produced a faded red, ribbon-tied bundle of letters. René slipped one out without removing the ribbon and opened a letter she’d written to Bob while she was a Monti student. She skimmed the letter and one sentence popped out; “There is so much in the world I want to know.” She still felt the same way.

She disposed of that letter and slipped out another; “Bob, darlin’” she’d written in 1947, “I have an optimistic soul to counter your pessimism. I think the past was horrible and the future will be bright, while you think the past is wonderful and the future will be horrendous.”

René’s pessimism had surfaced when Bob was no longer around to mumble his negativity. She’d inherited Bob’s insomnia and his anger, too, after they’d separated. Were all human beings a mixture of optimism and pessimism? Did changed circumstances alter a person’s attitude? René was certainly less negative since she’d made her decision to live in Ireland.

René tossed another letter in the garbage. Skimming the next two she appreciated them from a new perspective. With her third-eye intuition she grasped the facts with a deeper understanding. Her basic values of honesty and integrity had remained the same since she was seventeen, but her idea that “men knew best” had definitely changed.

Pausing from her hunt for buried treasure long enough to grill a cheese sandwich, René nibbled on personality traits as well as her lunch. Bob had always had an angry personality; in his letters she found diatribes on politics and polemics, while her letters revealed her desire to please. She’d found bits of doggerel poetry she’d written, a lipstick kiss where she’d pressed her lips to the stationery. She could tell the stationery had been perfumed by the circular brown stains on the paper. Now she understood her pleasing behavior: it shouted, LOVE ME, LOVE ME.

Sarah had searched for love all her life and experiential debris had almost buried her alive. She’d researched her past in San Pedro, so like the Hammond of her childhood, and cried her eyes out in therapy until now René’s future held more allure than Sarah’s past. No longer willing to sacrifice herself for love, René understood that happiness was her choice, and hers alone.

She carried her paper plate into the living room to toss it in the garbage and returned to her cross-legged position on the carpet. Removing a faded envelope postmarked 1946, a three-cent stamp still affixed to the upper right-hand corner, she removed a letter from Bob. He’d written, “If you really desire to become an artist, you will have to know and understand all types of people. From the bowery bum on West Madison Street, to the dowager on the Gold Coast. If you understand the street walker on South State and the bankers on LaSalle, you’ll be able to express yourself visually in a sophisticated, cultured manner and you’ll have a fuller life.” That insight from Bob, a nineteen-year-old sophisticate. His intellectualism was such an attraction, one of the

reasons Sarah had married him. She'd thought him older and wiser, and with him she'd learn about life. And she had, for a while.

Poor Bob, he got lost in the material world and that spark of enlightenment he'd been born with was buried beneath his desire for power and money. Too bad he didn't follow his own advice—his own dreams—and become a writer instead of a lawyer. After Sarah left Bob, she'd met the bums and dowagers from San Pedro to Palos Verdes, from Los Angeles to Beverly Hills, and now she understood the worth of Bob's advice. Neither a painter nor a writer could remain naïve and still create anything of value.

Focused once more on the miscellany within arm's reach, René skimmed letter after letter written in the late forties and was attracted to the names of popular songs and hit movies. In many of her letters she'd mentioned *Sentimental Reasons*, their song, and Bob had written about the movie *Dishonored Lady*, starring Hedy Lamaar, and *The Big Sleep*, starring Bogart and Bacall. René thought about the big sleep she'd been in all those years.

These letters were research for her book. René reached for her scissors and cut out portions that contained information she might use. She placed all the cut bits and pieces into a new file folder and threw away the swiss-cheesed letters.

Reaching into the garbage bag again, she retrieved a spiral notebook. Opening it she discovered she'd kept a record of the joys of early marriage and motherhood. She laughed as she read: "Three-year-old Josh asked his father to whistle at him, and when Bob did, Josh said, 'Thanks, I feel so much younger.'

"'What do you mean?' Bob asked, and my three-year-old answered, 'Well, Mommy said someone whistled at her and she felt a lot younger.'"

The kid was precocious, no doubt about that. But what was her hang-up about looking younger? Josh was three, so Sarah was only twenty-three.

Opening an envelope that had resealed itself with time, René removed another letter from Bob. She read a portion of one sentence, “Your silky skin and luscious lips,” and realizing it was a mushy love letter, she tore it to shreds and dumped the fragments in the garbage. Unwilling to risk reading another letter like that, she gathered the few remaining, tore them in half, and dumped them in the garbage without reading them or shedding a tear.

René thought of a quote she’d recently taped in her journal: “I could love him. Fix him. Or make literature out of him.” She crossed her arms over her breasts and stared out the window without seeing. The quote had triggered an insight. Whenever she wrote a few pages about Bart or Bob, she always referred to herself as “she.”

Perusing another pile of uninspected items, René unfolded a faded Sunday comic, entitled, *Pop* by Al Vermeer. She read one of the captioned squares, “My baby . . . ! Married to a perfect stranger,” and laughed as she looked at the last square, a man waving his finger under his daughter’s nose as she played in her sand box. Bart had mailed that cartoon to his daughter when she was a student at Monticello. At the bottom of the page he’d penned, “If a man doesn’t treat you right, Baby, just tell ol’ Dad and he’d better watch out for me. I love you, Daddy.”

René admired her father’s elaborate penmanship. He wouldn’t have had time to brush his teeth if he’d given hell to every man who’d mistreated her. She refolded the comic strip as if it were precious aged lace. Holding it to her breast, she whispered, “I love you, too, Daddy.” She placed the comic in her “SAVE” pile and decided that when she returned to the states she’d have it framed.

The plastic bag was almost empty when she discovered four Great Books. It was far less than her share, but still a reminder that if she persisted, some of her needs would

be met. She hugged the volumes of Aristotle and Plato as if the authors were still alive, and placed all four volumes on the shelf to be packed with her books.

Once more she reached into the brown bag and was shocked when she retrieved her father's leather wallet. She turned it over and over, remembering when the police officer had handed it to her after Bart's death.

She rose slowly from her knees and placed the wallet on her desk, unwilling to handle any more memories. She dusted off the back of her jeans with both hands, grabbed her purse from the chair, and rushed off to the grocery store for more cardboard boxes.

Returning three-quarters of an hour later, the car trunk loaded with boxes, she carried them into her apartment, two at a time, mumbling, "I'm sick to death of sorting and packing."

Day after day, René sorted and packed. Each day she moved her father's wallet from one spot to another, promising that the following day, for sure, she'd look through it. But another day passed as she removed the wallet from her nearly empty dresser and placed it unopened on a packed and labeled carton in the living room.

On the day she taped up the last carton for storage, René sat on the edge of her bed and turned the wallet over and over. After twenty-seven years, the soft leather had mellowed with age into a rich blend of muted browns. How many times did Bart open this wallet to hand her a "fiver"? She remembered him handing her each week's allowance saying, "Spend it wisely. Don't come to me in the middle of the week and tell me you've run out of money." To this day, she'd followed his advice.

Holding the wallet up to the window, sunlight revealed darker stains on the leather and René wondered if they were dried blood. Trembling, she placed the wallet on the bed and sat brooding for a few minutes. Then, with determination, she picked up the

wallet again, unfolded it, and stared at a picture of herself. Surprised that her father had carried her picture in his wallet, she looked at the black and white head shot taken when she was nineteen and pregnant, which showed a smiling Sarah, her lips full and darkened with lipstick, dark hair curling around her youthful face, and thick dark lashes accenting her heavy-lidded eyes. “I was pretty. Too bad I didn’t know it then.”

She flipped the acetate insert and stared at a head shot of Bob. He’d never been more handsome than the year he’d graduated from law school, his jaw strong and determined. Her heart flip-flopped as she stared at her long-ago love. That idealistic boy didn’t exist anymore.

The next insert held a picture of Josh. Blonde ringlets framed his baby face and his full lips, shaped like his mother’s, curved in the same sweet smile as he posed in a freshly pressed cotton suit.

Removing the photo from its cover, René placed the picture on the bed and turned the next insert. There she found a picture of Johnny and removed it, too. Aware that the pictures of the twins must have been taken on the same day, as they both wore matching seersucker suits, she was struck again at the fact that the twins were fraternal, not identical. Johnny looked like a miniature Bob with the same crooked Gene Kelly grin and dark hair falling over his forehead.

She laid Johnny’s picture next to Josh’s, removed Bob’s picture from the acetate and moved the pictured twins to make room for their father’s picture between them. She stared at the trio for a long time. “I was a good wife and mother.” She touched each photograph tenderly with one finger. “This was my family,” she said, her nose wrinkling as she tried to hold back tears.

“I WILL NOT CRY,” she commanded and turned another plastic coated picture holder, looking for a picture of Elizabeth. Finding none, she wondered why her father

hadn't carried a picture of his wife. Then she remembered he'd repeatedly asked El to have her picture taken and her answer was always the same, "I'm not photogenic like Sarah."

Overwhelmed with sadness, René returned the pictures to their covers and laid the wallet on the bed. Covering her face with her hands, she moaned, "I have no family. I'm all alone."

Picking up the wallet once again, she discovered her father's driver's license. Eyes: Blue. *Very, very deep blue.* Weight: 150 pounds. *Seventy-five pounds of belly.* Date of birth: April 7, 1903. Bart was born right after the turn-of-the-century, and his daughter could live until the year 2000. A century wasn't all that long.

Thumbing through the wallet, René discovered Bart's honorary membership in the Elks Club and his Tavern Owners' Association card. She opened the currency pocket and found it empty. She fingered the stay lacing in the center and inspected the wallet completely, or so she thought. Still unwilling to pack the wallet, she investigated it more thoroughly, and this time she found an inner pocket she'd overlooked. She removed a faded piece of newspaper, yellowing with age, unfolded it, and read: "Bart Mindel was awarded first prize in the Bijou Theater's amateur song and dance contest." She held that fragile newspaper clipping in her hands as if it might disintegrate if she breathed on it. Bart was ten when he won that contest. This clipping must be from a 1913 newspaper. He'd carried this clipping for almost forty years. Winning that contest must have been the most important event of his life. Now René understood why her father had cried during the last movie they'd seen together. Al Jolson had run away from home to be an entertainer, but Bart had never had the opportunity to live up to his potential. With his voice and personality, he might have become a major star. His voice was better than Al Jolson's, Perry Como's, and Frank Sinatra's put together. René reread the clipping

several times and remembered her father's description of that memorable contest:

"Baby," he'd said, "I wore my white ice-cream suit, and a blue-and-white polka-dot tie. I was small for my age, so I looked even younger than ten when I belted out *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. I brought the house down and that's how I won first prize."

Bart had told Sarah he'd been asked to join the vaudeville tour after he'd won first prize. He'd looked crestfallen when he said, "My parents wouldn't allow it. They said I was too young. I wanted to be a professional entertainer. I planned to, but then I met your mother and got married, so I needed a steady job. I worked for the railroad for awhile—in the office. Married or not, I might have anyway, but then along came the Depression." Bart's mood shifted as he chuckled, "and so did you."

Bart had become an entertainer after all, but for a bunch of drunks! He might still be alive if . . . no, no, no, René cautioned herself, no ifs.

René's feelings were mixed as she folded the wallet in half: there was pleasure in knowing that her father had carried her picture in his wallet, and sorrow that he had died without realizing his dreams.

She smoothed the soft leather with her finger tips, then held the wallet to her lips and kissed it, whispering, "I love you, Daddy." Not wanting to pack the wallet for storage, she placed it in a manila envelope with her birth certificate and other significant items she intended to mail to Josh for safe-keeping.

Jerking her lipstick off the bathroom shelf, René smeared it across her lips, tucked her keys and a handkerchief in her sweater pocket, and dashed out the front door. She walked what seemed like miles, and with each step she replayed Carla's words: "When you can forgive your parents and love them, despite their mistakes, you'll be able to love and forgive yourself."

It was easier for René to forgive Bart, for despite his mood swings and alcoholic behavior, she knew he loved her. She wasn't sure her mother ever had. As for loving herself, René was well on her way the day she purchased her ticket to Ireland.

Passing strangers nodded at the woman walking alone, and René wondered what personal grief they'd experienced. One day we'll all be dead, she thought, and our private grief will be buried with us.

On her long walk back to the apartment, it occurred to René that it didn't matter if she wrote her book in first person or third. If her book *was* published, her secrets would become public. Would she be strong enough to withstand public scrutiny? For sure her mother would be humiliated, having her secrets revealed. On the other hand, Elizabeth had stayed in denial for so long, she might not even recognize the truth. Elizabeth was the queen of "De-Nile."

It was apparent to René she was taking a tremendous risk exposing herself and her family to ridicule and embarrassment. By the time she'd unlocked her front door, she knew, beyond a doubt, that she had to write the truth—nothing but the truth—even if it meant offending other people's sensibilities.

CHAPTER 54

The phone pealed as René turned the key in the lock, but she didn't rush. When she leisurely picked up the receiver and heard a man say, "Hello," she asked, "Bob, is that you?"

"Have you forgotten my voice already?"

"Hardly, just shocked that you actually returned my call."

"Elsie said you'd called and that it was important."

"It is, to me."

"So?"

René hesitated then said, "I've talked to Josh about banking my checks while I'm traveling, but I wanted to make sure you'll mail them to him."

"You're leaving L.A.? Where are you going?"

"That's not important. I'll be traveling for an extended period. Will you mail my checks to Josh?"

"Sure, why not. By the way, I hear you're writing a book. Is that true?"

"Uh huh, a novel."

"Well, it will be your ass if you don't flatter me!" Bob laughed.

"What makes you think you'll even be mentioned? By the way, have you heard I now use my middle name?"

"Yeah, I heard, but you'll always be Sarah to me. It's a good thing you're moving away from crazy L.A. If you stayed there much longer, no telling what you'd change."

You changed wives and you still live in “podunksville.” Bob’s voice was subdued as he said, “I always wanted to write a book. I’ll probably be on my death bed still saying, ‘Someday I’ll write my book.’ “

“I know.”

“That doesn’t sound like you. In the past you encouraged me.”

“In the past I believed in your dream. Now I have dreams of my own.”

“You always had a way with words,” Bob said, sarcasm gritting his words, and then without pausing, he asked, “What do you look like now?”

René giggled. “Now that you and my mother don’t say ‘eat, eat, eat,’ I’m gaining weight.”

“You’re getting fat! Letting yourself go?”

“Are you kidding? A few extra pounds make me look sensuous, not fat. I’ve dated men not much older than the twins.”

“You’re putting me on!”

“You know I tell the truth. I dated a man of twenty-nine who looked like Michelangelo’s David. Remember the sculpture we saw in Florence? I copied David’s picture from my art history book, added a black mustache and it looked just like my David. That’s his name, and he’s Italian, too.”

Bob ignored the reference and asked, “Just how much do you weigh now?”

“One hundred and seven pounds.”

“That’s exactly what you weighed when we met.”

The ex-lovers chatted for a few minutes more, René’s personality reverting back every time Bob called her Sarah or reminded her of their past coupling.

Taking a deep breath she said, “There’s something I want you to know. We loved each other for a long time. I’m sorry if I hurt you along the way. I wasn’t a grown up then.”

“You said that very well, Sarah. We did love each other or we wouldn’t have stayed married so long. I’m sorry, too, if I hurt you.” IF? René fumed. IF? Tuning out Bob’s excuses, she refocused on his words when she heard, “ ... but I love Lorraine and...”

“And I love me, myself, and I,” René said, cutting him off. There was nothing left to say but good-bye. This good-bye would be permanent.

Four days before René’s scheduled departure, she had dinner with Roxane. They said their farewells since Roxy would be flying to New York in the morning. In New York City she’d finalize her deal on a Fifth Avenue condo and would return to L.A. until after René’s plane landed in Dublin. Her Beverly Hills estate would be out of escrow by then, and she’d pocket a million dollars after taxes. “That ought to keep me in groceries for a while,” Roxy laughed, and then handed René a going-away present. René oohed and ahed over the brown leather passport case with RENÉ printed in gold on the cover. When she opened the case, her eyes bugged out at the hundred-dollar bill tucked inside. “I can’t accept this, Roxy, it’s too generous.”

“It’s just a little play money, sweetie. You’ll have expenses you never dreamed of just getting yourself out of this country.”

At the front door the friends hugged good-bye, and René thanked Roxy again for the gift and “all the other gifts you’ve given me, especially the gift of your friendship.”

Roxane, fifteen pounds lighter but still massive, crushed René in a bear hug and said, “Don’t forget when you meet with your New York publisher, my guest room will have your name on it.”

Two nights later, Shirley gave René a going away party, and every friend but Roxy and Ralph attended, including a handful of René’s former lovers. The female guests arrived carrying trays of edible goodies: cold cuts, French bread, potato salad, vegetables and dip. The men brought wine, potato chips, cans of olives, and jars of pickles. Shirl provided the bakery chocolate cake with “GOOD LUCK RENÉ” printed in white frosting across the top, with yellow sugar roses around the salutation.

All the guests had arrived with nonedible goodies, as well. Keith presented René with a set of oversized keys he’d cut out of white cardboard, and he’d hand lettered the name of every city the guest of honor planned to visit.

Gloria’s box was splendidly beribboned, but her gift brought chuckles as René lifted out a humongous black plastic dildo. The group was reduced to tears of laughter when René feigned innocence and said, “Thanks, but what’s this for?”

“A decoration for your room!” Shirl shot back, and the laughter multiplied.

Shirl gave René a multicolored kite with long paper tails, “For your lonely afternoons,” she said, and then added, “that doesn’t weigh as much as Glo’s gift. I’m sure you’ll have room in your suitcase for this *and that!*”

Jack gifted René with an unwrapped copy of Steinbeck’s *Diary of a Novel*, “Ruth Anne picked this out for you,” he said. Then he presented his gifts: A color photo of the wedding couple, a Grumbacher watercolor set, three sable watercolor brushes, and a block of watercolor paper. “I know you’re going to Ireland to write,” he said, “but you’re too fine an artist to give up painting. I thought you might want to illustrate your book.”

René carefully laid her presents on the carpet, rose from her chair, and walked to Jack's side. She gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek with her thanks, in full view of his bride.

Jack's wife, new to the crowd, had been treated like a second guest-of-honor when she was introduced. Ruth Anne, unlike the other women Jack had "dated," had a tall, angular figure. Her straight nose and strong jaw were accentuated by her severe hairdo — dark hair bunned on the top of her head. Her heavy eyebrows and lashes brought attention to her soulful brown eyes. Her inner beauty shone like a beacon as she listened intently to whoever spoke.

René pecked Ruth Anne's cheek — they'd met briefly at the wedding — and said, "Thanks for the book." Jack's bride returned her kiss and said, "Any friend of Jack's is a friend of mine."

Turning back to Jack, René smiled and said, "You're a very lucky man, my friend. I'm very happy for you." And she meant it.

The wine flowed and the laughter increased with each toast to René's health and success. David, of Michelangelo fame, raised his glass and said, "With your gift of gab, René, you'll write a best seller." The blonde bimbet (she was too young to be a bimbo) who had arrived on David's arm and clung to his side the entire evening, lifted her wine-filled water glass to René and in an attempt at humor said, "Your friends are just great. I'll invite them all to my next party. Who needs you!" A hush quieted the room.

At the door, René was hugged and kissed by everyone but the bimbet. Dagmar (honest to God, that was her name) reminded René of a younger version of Lorraine with her mountains of flesh puffing out over her low-cut black crepe dress. Her genuine

rhinestone belt, her only brilliance, was tied around her thick middle and sparkled as she reared out the door.

René, closing the door behind Dagmar's curvaceous ass, turned to Shirl and said, "Good riddance. David must be out of his mind."

"No, out of his trousers!"

Shirl, the professional writer, and René the "want-to-be," spent the next half hour discussing bimbos in general and Dagmar in particular.

Back in her apartment by 10:30 p.m. — all the guests had left early because of work the next day — René was too high from excitement, not wine, to settle down. She spent the next half hour tucking her gifts into an already swelled suitcase. She giggled as she threw the unwrapped dildo in the garbage can outside her back door, wondering what the garbage man would think.

She wandered around the half-emptied apartment, appraising the few artifacts that remained. She wanted to take one item with her so that no matter where she lived, she would feel at home. She had three criteria for her choice: the object must be small, unbreakable, and lightweight. After fingering a small glass paperweight that wouldn't fit the category of unbreakable or lightweight, her eyes fixed on a small paper-mâché lion. It fit all the criteria: it was an inch-and-a-half long, from head to tail, lightweight, and unbreakable, but what really sealed her choice was the open mouth with a badly painted red tongue sticking out. She'd purchased the toy at an outdoor fair because it was so funky it made her laugh. René wrapped the lion in a piece of tissue and tucked it into her oversized purse near her wallet and passport case.

Still restless, René decided this was the night she'd call Ralph. She'd been toying with the idea for a week. It was past midnight, but she knew he stayed up late, and at that

hour, on a week night, she'd have a chance to find him at home. As she dialed the number, she wondered if he still lived in that miserable dump. A man who spoke English answered, and René's nose wrinkled in disgust remembering the repulsive odor of the hall.

She was about to hang up when she heard Ralph's deep voice and the soft harmony of his speech pattern. "Hi, Ralph, it's me, Sarah—but I'm called René now."

"I recognize your voice, Baby. I've been wanting to call you for months, but I was afraid you'd hang up on me."

Ralph sounded genuinely pleased when René told him of her plans. "You'll write the 'bestus' book, Baby. I knows you will." Laughing at his ghetto talk, he said, "Now that I know how to talk like a white, middle-class-macho, I can't forget my origins!"

"Have you ever read *Siddhartha*?" he asked. René thought he sounded like an English professor. Before she could answer he said, "In my last lit class, we read a lot of Hermann Hesse: *Siddhartha*, *Steppenwolf*, *Narcissus and Goldmund*, and now that I know you're writing a book, I wondered if you'll end your books the same way Hesse did?"

"I read *Siddhartha*. What do you mean about Hesse's endings?"

"He always ends his novels the same way, 'As I look back on my life, it was the most miserable, rotten, disgusting' — well, I'm paraphrasing, but you get the message. After that he'll write, 'But as I look back on my life it was the most wonderful, astounding, marvelous.' What will you write, Baby? The good or the bad? You've had both, everyone does."

“I won’t know that until I sort myself out in Ireland. Maybe there I’ll remember some of the good!” René laughed, as she marveled at Ralph’s use of language since she’d last seen him.

“Could I see you before you leave, Baby?”

René could almost feel Ralph’s muscular arms surrounding her, and her heart pounded as she visualized his broad smile and white, white teeth. With reluctance she said, “I’d really like to see you, Ralph, honest I would, but it’s after midnight now, so tomorrow’s my last day in L.A. and I still have a lot to do.” She thought of Ralph’s creamy milk chocolate shoulders but stuck to her resolve and changed the subject. “Did you graduate?”

“I sure as hell did, but so what? Now I have to lie on my job resumes or I’m told, ‘You’re over-qualified.’ An educated black at the shipyards is the last thing management needs. Yeah, I’ll be back at the shipyards next week, where I worked before I left for Nam. So much for getting a good education! But what the hell, at least I’ll earn enough money to get the hell out of this dump.”

“But Ralph, what about your art, your dreams?”

“Forget that! I could play at being an artist while the GI bill paid the rent, now I have to get real. By the way, you were always bitching about not having any money, how can you afford this trip?”

“It will only cost me a hundred a week to live in Ireland, so I’ll manage.”

“Only a hundred a week! Hey, Baby, I’ve lived on a lot less right here in fat America.”

René recognized the bitterness in Ralph’s voice. “Hang onto your dreams, Ralph. You are the most talented artist I’ve ever met.”

“Do you mean that, Baby?”

“You know I wouldn’t ‘jive you boy,” René laughed and Ralph’s mood was lifted, temporarily.

Twisting the phone cord in a tighter knot as the silence between the odd couple grew, René finally broke it. “There’s something I need to clear up. A friend of mine got V.D. warts from the guy she’d been seeing for over a year. He knew he’d been exposed when he met her, but he never mentioned it, until she had warts of her own. And, well, I just wanted to thank you for telling me when you had that scare. You didn’t have to. Now that I know more about life, I’m not so judgmental, and I just wanted to say thanks for trying to protect me.”

“Was the guy black? That infected your friend?”

“No, white.”

“Everything evens out in the end, René. Don’t worry about it. And don’t worry about me. I’ll make out fine. Maybe I’ll end up a sculptor, not a painter. I’ll be welding out at the shipyards! Just take care of your beautiful self in Ireland. No telling what diseases those Irishmen carry!” Ralph laughed. Then, serious once more, he said, “You are the best friend I’ve ever had, and I’ll never forget you. Don’t lose touch. Send me a postcard from Ireland. Got a pencil? Write down my sister’s phone number so when you get back to the states you can find me.”

After René hung up, she sat in the rocker for a long time. Her friends considered Ralph nothing but a jock, but he was so much more. He had truly been her friend, not just her lover. She wanted him to have the chance to live his dreams as she was prepared to live hers.

It was after 2:00 A.M. before René finally settled down in bed and then, rather than sleep, she thought about the “magic moments” of her life. The good times she’d almost forgotten. She counted them off like sheep: Shaking hands with President

Kennedy at the Inaugural ball. Adlai Stevenson kissing her hand as she stood in line at a reception. Looking up into Arthur Miller's eyes as he shook her hand, and understanding why Marilyn Monroe had married him. Reading Maya Angelou's palm and having a drink with Alex Haley after he spoke at a writer's conference. Dancing in Greece, her arms stretched up to the shoulders of the man on each side while one repeated, "One, two, three. One, two, three," the only English words he knew.

René thought of the young man who'd helped her build "The Apartment," and all the young men who'd packed up the environmental sculpture. When they'd finished taping and labeling the last box, they'd hoisted her up on their shoulders like a football hero who'd made the winning touchdown. They'd marched Sarah around the barn singing her praises.

Still wide awake, she remembered the first Christmas in the Vanderville tri-level. The twins were asleep as she and Bob sat on the floor of the unfurnished living room, their backs supported by the wall. The darkened room lit by the miniature lights on the Christmas tree. They held hands and Sarah had whispered, "I've never been happier in my life."

Would she ever be that happy again? Sitting up in bed, she switched on the light and reached for her pen and tablet.

"Dear Carla," she wrote. "Please forgive this 'nonstationery' but it's after 2:00 A.M. and I don't want to get out of bed. Excuse the 'please' — ha, ha.

"Really, I'm writing you this thank-you note now, so I can mail it in the morning, tomorrow being my last day in L.A.

"A year ago—or was it two—If you'd pinched me I would have said, 'Thank you—that's how out of touch I was with my feelings. Now, with my feelings unfrozen, I

can recognize at least half a dozen — from anger and sadness, to joy and wonderment — so I'd say that's more than a good smoke-free beginning.

“I will always appreciate and bless you for holding my hand while I found my own path. So until we meet again, many, many thanks.”

René placed the tablet and pen back on her bedside table and, relaxed now, she turned over and fell asleep.

She overslept, but by 10:00 A.M. she was on the phone to the airlines requesting the exact measurements of the storage space under the seat.

She scribbled down the dimensions, addressed and stamped her note to Carla, and headed for Beverly Hills. She mailed Carla's note and her last telephone bill at the post office—the phone would be disconnected the following day—then headed for Bullock's.

An hour later she'd purchased one piece of luggage that would hold her typewriter and fit perfectly under the plane seat. She left Bullock's holding the luggage handles and felt as if she were already traveling. The suitcase had been on sale so with the money she saved, René walked into Brentano's bookstore and selected half a dozen paperbacks for the trip.

Her travel agent hadn't been able to tell her if there was a library in Leenane, but she rather doubted it with only two hundred people in the village. René had already packed her hardcover thesaurus and illustrated dictionary. Both books were heavy and she was determined to leave them in Ireland and purchase new copies when she returned to the States.

Packing her purchases in her new pseudo-leather luggage, she headed for her car in Bullock's underground parking lot. She placed her purchases in the trunk and slammed it, prepared to drive back to her apartment. But before she unlocked the car

door, she glanced at her new drugstore Timex and decided she had time to do some window shopping. It made no sense for her to rush home, sit on the floor, and stare at her packed luggage. She'd already given away, thrown away, or stored what remained of her furnishings. Tonight she'd sleep in her sleeping bag and then give it to Shirl who would use it while she was out of the country.

René walked at a fast pace down Wilshire Boulevard, her pace slowing as she neared Bonwit's. At the entrance, she noticed a well-turned-out platinum blonde of indeterminate age. The woman's expression of bored distraction matched the mannequins in the window. René was sure that's how she'd looked before she'd left Bob.

Strolling toward I Magnin, René noticed a well-dressed dowager, her expensive fragrance lingering on the sidewalk long after she'd entered the store. René, smiling, followed her inside and at the Chanel counter, she asked, "Do you have any perfume samples?"

The haughty saleslady, obviously used to better things, flashed a large diamond and said, "Well, I suppose," and reluctantly handed René a small glass vial of Chanel #5, letting her know by her arrogant expression that she thought René did not belong in I Magnin.

"Thank you," René said, repressing a smile as she tucked the perfume sample in her purse. Arrogant clerks no longer intimidated René; she knew her worth. She chuckled all the way out to the street.

René knew this would be her last visit to Beverly Hills and she soaked up the atmosphere. She overheard two women as they passed her on the sidewalk. "Sure, L.A. is smoggy and the traffic's unbearable, but my husband says, 'This is where the money is.' "

How often Sarah had heard Bob say those very words, but he'd always added, "So stop bitching."

René had not found money in L.A. until recently. The irony of it. Prepared to leave the country, René had been offered a dream job. One of her constructions had been knocked off its pedestal at the County Museum Show and she'd gone to the insurance company to collect \$450. Check in hand, the owner of the "art insurance" business had surprised her with a lunch invitation.

She'd nibbled on her Caesar salad, waiting for him to make his move. She'd lived in L.A. long enough to know the man was after something. By dessert he'd offered her a job and said, "You'll travel all over the world. I'll teach you everything I know about the art insurance business and \$15,000 a year is only a starting salary."

He'd insisted she consider his offer, even after she'd told him she had her airline tickets and had already sold her stove and refrigerator. "Think about it," he'd pressured, "and call me."

René glanced at her new wrist watch again, the first watch she'd worn on her wrist in over four years. The cheap Timex was guaranteed and she hoped it would guarantee that she wouldn't miss a travel connection. She'd chosen a watch with large numerals so she could check the time without her glasses. Now she noted that it was after 2:00 P.M. Feeling hungry, she crossed the street to a corner restaurant and ordered a hamburger "with everything on it." This would be the last burger she'd have for a long time.

René sipped her chocolate milkshake and thought about the women she'd observed on the sidewalks of Beverly Hills. She felt sure that shopping was their full-time occupation. She was delighted she had more to do with her life.

Arriving at her apartment at 4:15 with an hour or more to kill before Josh arrived, René removed the “urned my freedom” carafe from the window sill and carried it outside. She dug a hole in the earth with a tablespoon and then ritualistically poured the wet-ashed remains of the “Mrs. Robert D. Shallot” note paper into the hole.

The time to bury the past had arrived and the dried yellow rose that had floated in the urn now rested on the ashes. She lovingly placed a bright red, juicy strawberry on top, for the good times, and pushed the soft dirt back over the hole with her shoe.

Three-quarters of an hour later, Josh arrived. He’d taken the bus from San Diego so he could spend the night with his mother and after her departure, he’d drive the Pontiac home and use it while she was away.

They went to the deli for dinner and talked a mile a minute about his plans and hers. They reminisced about the good times, and cracked up laughing about the time they’d all vacationed on a houseboat and the anchor had been lost within the first half hour.

Shirl had lent René her sleeping bag for Josh and by 10:00 P.M. they were both asleep on the living room floor.

Neither mother nor son ate breakfast, so by 10:00 A.M. René was dressed in her new, finely cut tan corduroy pantsuit with the big patch pockets on the jacket. Her oversized real leather purse, purchased with Roxane’s money gift, was packed with her passport, tickets, travelers’ checks, chewing gum, handkerchiefs, and makeup. She waited impatiently for Shirl and Glo to arrive.

Fifteen minutes later, her luggage — two large suitcases and the smaller one holding her typewriter — were in the trunk and Josh was at the wheel of the Pontiac.

At the TWA counter forty minutes later, René's bags were checked through by the time Josh had parked the car. At the gate they made small-talk for a few minutes and then René excused herself saying to Josh, "I promised your grandmother I'd call, so please keep an eye on my friends! I don't want to be responsible for them stowing away on the plane!"

Dropping quarter after quarter into the phone slot, she wondered why she'd ever agreed to make this last-minute call. When her mother answered after the first ring, she said, "Okay, Mom, I called as I promised, but it'll have to be short, my plane leaves in fifteen minutes."

"You mean you're really going? I thought you'd change your mind. You still could. You could change your ticket for one to Chicago and come live with me." (*In her one-bedroom, cluttered apartment?*) "I've kept this apartment so you'd always have a home."

René almost choked on suppressed laughter.

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing, Sarah?" her mother asked in a serious tone of voice.

"It's right for me. Can't you wish me luck?"

"Okay, I get it, but be careful. You know I'm stronger than you are."

"We're both strong. Why make us rivals?"

"Okay, Sarah, you're stronger. You're just like your father. He always wanted adventure."

"Elizabeth, please listen."

"Since when do you call me Elizabeth? *I am your mother!*"

“I want to get your attention. I want *you* to hear *me*. I know I’m not living the life you planned for me, but it is *my* life. I am not just like my father, and I am not just like you. I am just like me.”

There was a pause . . . a fifteen second silence, then Elizabeth spoke with an unexpected softness: “Okay, I understand. You win. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” René replied, still wondering why her mother had to make everything into a win or lose proposition.

Back at the gate she hugged Shirl and Glo. She almost lost her composure when she hugged Josh. Flight 625 to New York was announced over the loud speaker for the second time, and with second hugs all around, René handed her ticket to the attendant at the gate and walked down the ramp without looking back.

She slid her typewriter bag under the seat in front of her, folded her raincoat in half and stored it in the compartment above, and then buckled herself into her seat. For the first time since Carla had hypnotized her to stop smoking, she wanted a cigarette so much she thought she’d jump right out of her skin. “Hang on, it will pass,” Carla had assured her, and it did, after she took a deep breath. Now she took three deep breaths but still lusted for a smoke. At least she wasn’t sitting in the smoking section; or she’d have bummed one, that’s for sure.

It was a smooth flight, without emergencies, and the stewardess, with time on her hands after serving lunch, chatted with René. When she heard René’s plans, she was caught up in René’s excitement and said, “Connemara is the most beautiful place in the world. I visited my aunt there last year. I wish I were going with you.”

From time to time, throughout the flight, the stewardess returned to stand next to René’s seat and tell her more about Ireland. When the captain announced that they would be landing in a half hour, the stew said, “Please give me your address. If I get some free

time, I'd love to come visit you. I've got to prepare for landing now, but be sure to give me your address before you deplane."

Kennedy airport was so large and René so confused, that she had to ask for directions to the international flight area more than once. Her typewriter case was a dead weight and periodically she would lower it to the floor and pull it along by its straps, then hoist it back up for another few steps. She wore her raincoat rather than carry it, and felt hot and very bothered, afraid she would miss her flight to Dublin if she continued to move at such a snail's pace.

With only twenty minutes before departure, she arrived at the Air Lingus counter, out of breath and eager to board.

The Air Lingus representative at the desk, spying her typewriter bag, said, "That's too large to carry on," and came around the counter saying, "Give it to me and I'll have it checked through for you."

"This bag contains my typewriter and I have to carry it with me or it might be damaged. I called the airlines for the dimensions under the seat and this bag is absolutely the right size."

"You cannot carry that bag on board!"

"Yes, I can."

Scowling, the "authority" pointed to a chair and said, "Go sit over there. You're holding up the line. Someone will come and talk to you."

René sat and watched as the line that had formed behind her diminished and still no one came to speak to her. Passengers began to board, and René wondered if she was going to miss her flight, but no way would she depart without her typewriter within arm's reach.

Minutes before departure a uniformed man, possibly the captain, walked toward René and said without a smile, “I understand you insist on carrying luggage aboard. You may, but I must inform you that if it doesn’t fit under the seat, we will have to remove it before the plane takes off.”

I, and that’s a capital I, grinned from ear to ear as I boarded the plane and located my seat in the tourist section. I shoved my typewriter case under the seat in front of me with a half inch to spare, satisfaction written all over my face as I smiled up at my soon-to-be seat mate. She struggled out of her raincoat and placed it in the overhead bin, settled in her seat, and buckled up as the plane moved slowly down the runway.

“We are next in line for take-off,” the captain announced, and I wondered if it had been the captain who’d permitted me to board. No matter, I’d stood my ground, not buckling under to authority. I’d won and that felt terrific. As Carla would have said, “Bravo!”

I removed Levertov’s *Woman Alone* from my oversized handbag and opened it at random.

“Now at least,” I read,

“She is past the time of mourning,

Now she can say without shame or deceit,

O blessed solitude.”

It wasn’t the first time I’d opened a book at random and found an appropriate message, but each time it happened, I was astonished. I felt as if God, the universe, or my guardian angel was sending me a message.

I held the closed book on my lap, my thumb marking the passage, as the 707 lifted off the runway into the December night sky. *I'm really on my way. I feel like I'm going home and I'm not even Irish.*

Over the Atlantic, while other passengers slept, I removed my notebook and pen from my purse and across the top of the first page, below the date, December 6, 1979, I wrote

THE BEGINNING